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RIDE THE WILD GUNS

A NOVEL

by **T. C. McCLARY**

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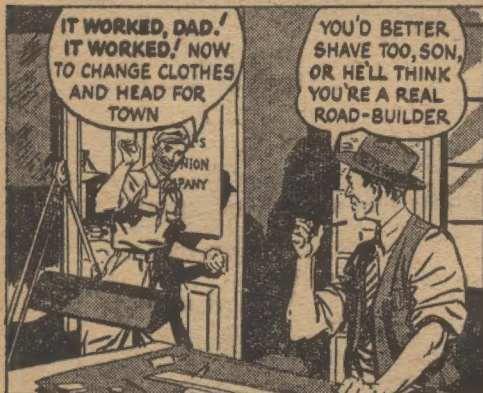
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VOLUME 18, No. 4



MAY, 1949

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ON THE •TRAIL•

WHOA'P there, compadres, an' light a spell. We got another Fifteen bunched and ready for the main herd an' it's time to roll a quirly while the tallyman makes his marks. Slim McCary rassled the top dogie this month; he's a humpin', bumpin' son of hell an' we ain't sure we got all the orneriness outa him, but come time for buyer's tally he'll be beef.

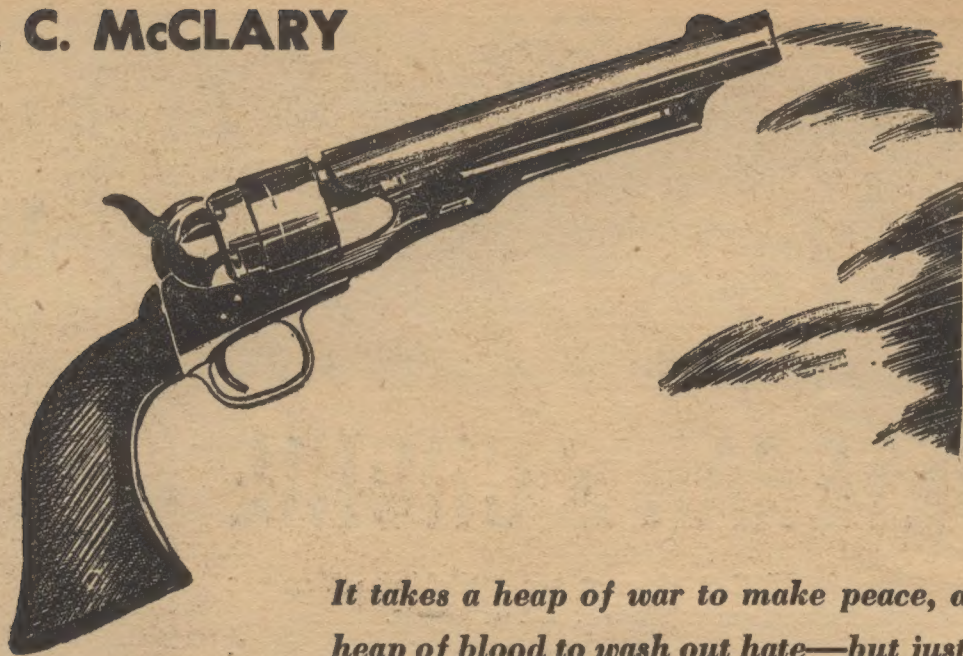
Ken Fowler's rope throwed another big one an' Dan Kirby choused up a maver-ick the folks'll be talkin' about, come trail's end.

Ever think one day's just like another On The Trail? Mister, you ain't looked. Ain't no two trees, no blades of grass, no two steps just alike—a spotted heifer is a spotted heifer, but one of 'em is purty an' the other licks your hand. An' the old ladino with the six-foot spread, why there's as many ways of bringin' him outa the brush as there is of him!

To give you an idea, here's the how of Badlands Buster, Raymond S. Spears' big

(Continued on page 129)

By T. C. McCLARY

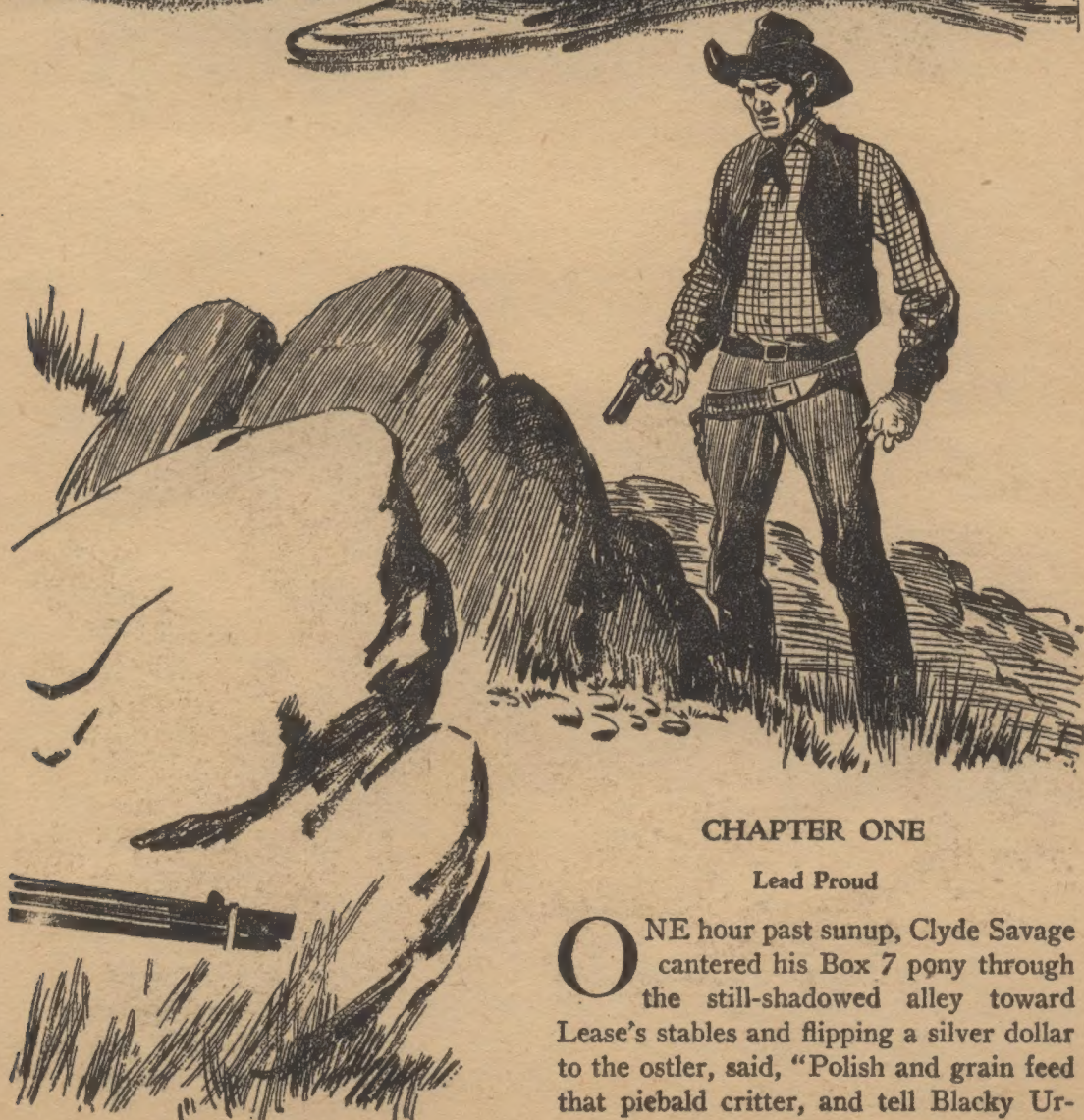


*It takes a heap of war to make peace, a
heap of blood to wash out hate—but just
one bullet to send a man to hell!*



Clyde snaked up through a rain crease and cut sign on Elb. . . .

RIDE THE WILD GUNS



CHAPTER ONE

Lead Proud

ONE hour past sunup, Clyde Savage cantered his Box 7 pony through the still-shadowed alley toward Lease's stables and flipping a silver dollar to the ostler, said, "Polish and grain feed that piebald critter, and tell Blacky Ur-

quart he has earned a month in pasture."

Old man Lease came out of his side office yawning and running a thick-fleshed, liver-mottled hand up under a single galoose. "You ain't checking out before Blacky gets back to give you a blowoff?" he demanded.

"I sure am, for just that reason!" Clyde answered. He had a smooth, lean face burned to a permanent copper color, and humor put a web of fine lines out from the corners of sharp, steel-gray eyes. "I aim to get home sometime this year," he grinned.

"Well, you are picking a right purty time," the old man grunted. "But I reckon letting yore own spread go to hell and pot for ten months to watch over a friend's interest entitles you to some luck."

Savage stood tall and spare in the stable doorway and poured a pyramid of tobacco into a brown paper. He spilled the ends, put a light to it and drew, took a deep savoring draw of his day's first smoke. "No more than any real friend does for another," he stated. "I don't reckon anything has gone wrong back home that I can't take care of mighty quick."

The stabler's eyes dropped to Clyde's gun, and recollecting some of his history, he silently agreed. Nobody shoved Clyde Savage around for long. He was a man who left the world strictly to its own business and demanded it do the same of him.

"Now what luck am I getting by going home right now?" the rancher grunted.

"Well, you have a new neighbor going up by the same stage," Lease told him. "A right pert and handsome female by name of Miss Jessica Tait."

"Miss?" Clyde repeated, and his thoughts sharpened the angular cut of his face. "That would be old T. K. Moffett's niece and heir. You mean that dude gal has come out from Boston to run the ranch herself?"

"With changes, according to her talk last night," Lease chuckled. "She has

seen enough of the West to decide we are raw, wild, half-savage, cruel, brutal, and uncouth, whatever that is."

Clyde's eyes splintered silver lights. "Mebbe she is right. I wonder how long it is going to take for her to learn why?"

"I wouldn't figure she will learn too quick," the old man grunted. "For a downright purty female, she has a heap of setness in her jaw."

Clyde Savage blew against his lips but contained his thoughts. He passed a few more words of gossip, hoisted his warbag and moved back out the alley. He left his warbag on the express platform, stopped by Sneed's to buy fresh linens, and crossed to Joe Gianni's St. Louis Tonsorial Emporium for a hot soaking and a scrape-down.

He sauntered back out slicked and shining, as day's golden light put its warmth through the town, and he watched the hotel door with a curious wonder about the girl. Luke Duncan came from the lobby and took position, loitering, upon the hotel stoop.

He watched Luke, cutting sign on him of all-night travel and wondering what had brought him here and why he had not ridden out to say howdy at Box 7. After a space he ambled across the street's thick dust, and mounting the steps, watched for Luke's first reaction. He felt better when he saw the grin and felt the old friendship beat out from him.

Luke said with candid honesty, "Boy, I am glad to run up with you here."

"I would figure," Clyde allowed with his attention upon rolling a cigar between his palms, "you might be looking for me out to Urquart's if you got around these parts."

Luke darkened and awkward embarrassment settled on his square and stolid face. "Well," he said, "if I were alone I'd have been out there for breakfast. But I am riding with Treadway, and he is still my boss."

Clyde felt easier at the information and flicked him with rough humor. "Still a foreman, when you could be an owner."

The other scowled. "You know anyone giving away good spreads this season?"

Clyde made a gesture. "You've got a third of mine any time you want it."

Luke moved awkwardly in his boots. "No, Clyde, and you know the reason. There is too much to bring quarrels on between pardners."

"Reckon we could fight now and then and still be friends," Clyde considered.

Luke gave a smile of appreciation. "This way, I know it," he said. "Which reminds me, we may be doing just that if you don't come home soon and look after yore own interests."

Clyde put a light to the tip of his cigar. He asked while drawing an even fire upon the tip, "Brands on my cattle getting faded?"

"No, ain't that bad yet," the foreman grinned. "But some of yore grass is getting almighty green and there been some changes."

Clyde flicked him a glance, but respected his position. Luke's boss, Treadway, was a man who fancied his cunning and had big ambitions. But he had never fancied breasting Clyde, and now Luke's brief warning set him to puzzling.

"Well," he allowed after a space, "matter of fact, I am coming home by next stage."

Luke's body stilled. When he looked at Clyde, a grudging speculation was in his eyes. "Same stage as Miss Tait," he commented.

The rancher stared at him. "You ain't afraid I might undo Treadway's sneak talk?" he grunted.

"Oh, that—" Luke muttered carelessly, and saw he had tipped his hand and stained beneath his burn.

"Why, you doggoned vulture," Clyde guffawed. "One look and you've got yore loop spinning!"

"What are you talking about?" the foreman demanded, but Luke had hit it. Treadway's oiled voice broke upon them and they turned as he came through the hotel doorway accompanied by a young lady Clyde acknowledged worth Luke's jealousy.

Treadway stopped with a cold stare at Clyde, hooding a silent curse under a coyote's smile at the coincidence of the meeting. "Quite a gathering of the home range," he allowed. "Miss Tait, this is yore wildest and most immediate neighbor, Clyde Savage."

SHE acknowledged the introduction with curiosity. She had a vivacious face still touched with New England's gentle color, eyes that could make a man melt, lips like rose petals, but an adamant firmness in her chin.

Without realizing it, she tipped Treadway's hand. "Mr. Savage," she murmured, "I have been hearing quite a lot about you."

Clyde swung a direct and mocking look at Treadway, who coughed, cleared his throat and found reason to have a word in private with Miss Tait before leaving. Clyde gave a rough laugh and stood on with Luke. "The old squeeze play, eh?" he muttered.

Luke stared at the street. He said stolidly, "I am yore friend, but I am still Treadway's foreman, Clyde."

"Sure," the rancher grunted and shook his shoulder with understanding.

Treadway came out with a frosty nod, and jerking his head at Luke, grunted, "We have got to be back by evening."

Luke gave Clyde a wry look. "Yo're a lucky dog!" he grunted.

"Don't blame me if the stage lurches," Clyde chuckled, and watched the two swing into leather and put a plume of dust advancing northward. He turned into the bar and ordered beer. Venter Elb came

in, a tall, gaunt, shifty-eyed nester from the desert fringe of Clyde's home range.

Elb stopped with surprise that turned to cunning as he called for a drink with a voice hoarse from all-night drinking. He turned to the rancher with fawning interest. "Figuring to visit the home range any time soon, Clyde?"

"I'm Savage to you and what I'm figuring is none of yore damned business," Clyde told him bluntly.

Spots of color flamed on Venter's high-boned cheeks and his eyes turned mean and nasty. "Mebbe you won't be riding yore hoss so high when you get back," he sneered. "There been a heap of changes on the range while you were off playing true friend, bucko."

Savage laid a flat, hard look upon him. "Venter," he told him metallically, "one more yip out of you and I will put the picture of yore face in blood upon this bar!"

"Sure, yore town and me a stranger!" the man grumbled, but not very loud, and simply to have a man's last word to save his pride.

The rancher put him from his mind. He had three beers, thinking of the girl and wondering what intrigue brought Treadway and Luke and Venter all into this distant town as she was arriving to take over her uncle's ranch. His thoughts washed into musing on her voice and her eyes—trouble he could handle anytime, but a man needed every advantage to get ahead of the boys with a female that fresh and handsome.

He had a picture again of Luke's wry look when leaving, and chuckled, and laying a coin out for the barkeep, drifted out into the rising heat. He stood on the stage platform looking at the great upswell of the land northward to his home country, and thought grimly of Treadway's attempted sneak play to get the inside track with Merritt's heiress.

The sun began to heat like a hot penny

in a molten cauldron, and the girl came from the hotel, moving with directness and rhythm. She gave him an open smile that held reservations, and after some small talk he commented, "I hear that you find our western ways a little rough, Miss Tait."

He sensed a stiffness come up through her. "I was raised by the Golden Rule and it seems to work both ways," she answered. "Why do all you cattlemen want to fight so much—isn't there enough trouble just in living?"

"Well, ma'am," he allowed with an ironic twist of humor, "yore second question kind of answers yore first out this way."

She twirled her parasol. She said with determination, "I mean to prove something to you, Mr. Savage. I mean to prove that man can live at peace with a neighbor."

"Being yore neighbor," he chuckled, "I am glad to hear that!"

A rising drum and a spine-tingling yell broke up the trail and he nodded as dust smoke broke atop a rise, and there was the glint of sweating horses.

The stage shook in with Spider Ambrose at the ribbons, a diminutive man with fierce mustaches almost reaching his shoulder points. He tooled his half-wild horses in a reckless circle to a halt that popped two sick-eyed drummers out the door. He tossed the reins to a hostler and came swarming after, hollering, "Why, Clyde Savage, you renegade bandit, it is about time you wuz coming home whilst there's a town left for me to drive to!"

"Getting windy up my way, Ambrose?" Clyde asked.

The driver's cantankerous gaze drifted across Venter Elb. "Wind," he nodded, "coming out of a bad quarter."

El Zebulon came out with tickets and bills of lading, and hostlers backed in fresh horses. Cursing the ornery animals, they made fast toggle chains. Venter Elb threw

open the stage door and started to shoulder in, until pulled back firmly and forcibly by Clyde's strong hand.

Clyde said on a quiet, flatted note, "There is a lady passenger, Elb."

Elb was drunk, and his mean mouth twitched back over yellowed teeth. "Ain't paid any higher fare than me, has she?" he demanded.

Clyde's hand still held his shoulder firmly. He drew back now, forcing the big, raw-boned Elb with him. Elb flamed and started to jerk free, but winced under the sudden pressure of the rancher's blunt fingers.

"You may have ridden us desert ranchers down in the old days, Savage," he snarled. "But times have changed! You'll sing a different tune when you get back, mister."

"Right now," Clyde told him, "I will sing my old tune." He turned to the agent without releasing his hold on Elb. "Zeb, help Miss Jessica to choose her seat."

The girl got seated and Clyde flung Venter Elb aside and followed. She sat self-consciously, showing a woman's gratefulness.

She turned to give Clyde a full, wide look. "You would not give an inch to any man, no matter what the reason, would you?"

"I might give a whole mile if a man had reason and asked civilly. But if you let a man take an inch he will take a mile out here, ma'am."

She shook her head at some chain of inward thought. Her brows furrowed. "No, it is not the other man; it is something in you that will not bend."

Elb climbed aboard and fell into noisy slumber immediately.

ADA TAIT was waiting at the station for her cousin, a girl raised by men and with men and knowing men on their own level. "Why, Clyde, you danged rattler," she greeted, "it is

about time you were coming back!" She gave him a personal look that closed Jessica out. Her mouth looked hard and ruthless for a brief space. "Those desert fringe boys been getting thirsty," she commented. "Well, count on me if I'm needed."

He gave her a smile. "I will be all right," he said. "But I'm obliged."

She gestured with her quirt. "Mebbe you'll want to see Luke Duncan. He's at Loving's bar."

"Thanks," he told her, and took off his hat to Jessica Tait. "It was a nice ride."

"It would have been," she answered, between wanting to see more of him and yet leave him chastised.

Ada snapped a look between them. "Jessica doesn't savvy the country very well yet, I calculate," she grinned.

Jessica included Ada in her aloofness. "There is only one definition of gentle folk in any country!"

Ada looked at Clyde. "Well, reckon that leaves us out!"

He helped them into a buckboard and watched the deft way Ada backed her thirsty team and tooled them into a trot. He thought, "Damn it, why can't a man be satisfied with what's right for him? Why does he have to always hanker after something he hasn't got?"

There was no answer to that, and he threw his bag up on the platform and moved along to Loving's. The place was thick with the smell of whiskey and damp sawdust, and thick bands of blue smoke drifted through the cool light. The bar was crowded. Laughter held a tight, watchful thread all through it, and range trouble hung through the atmosphere like a vague warning.

He found Luke Duncan and nodded and bellied up to the bar without need for speaking. Luke was stockier, more sober; more primitive of feelings and feudal in his loyalties. Clyde felt the disturbance in him at some shift of range alliances or

intrigue that might put Savage and Treadway against each other.

After a space Clyde asked, "What's happened to sting the boys out this way on a Thursday night?"

"Nothing yet," Luke growled. "Nobody figured you'd be back and mebbe that will change the picture. There has been some small rustling and Venter Elb's nesters have been crowding a mite and spreading off the desert, and the Gulch boys have begun to snap at the good ranches from the other side. That got the Big Bend outfits interested and altered, but so far everything is just talk. Nobody's made a move."

"Treadway?" Savage asked.

Luke gave him a bleak, guarded look, but shook his head. "He ain't moved; he ain't shown his hand."

Clyde grunted, "He won't show until he thinks he can scoop the pot! But he has wanted to lord the range too long not to have a hand in this."

"I'm still his foreman," Luke said stubbornly. "And I would be a dog to quit a man with trouble hanging, Clyde." He scowled at his drink. "But like I said, mebbe you've come back in time to change things. I can tell you this—Treadway ain't meant to buck you, and Ada's out of this so far, so the betting is kinda up to you."

"Then deal me out," Clyde said firmly. "I've had my own troubles with the Big Bend bunch, and the desert nesters have been living off my beef for years. If they want to eat each other up, that is all right with me as long as they leave the Corridor out of this."

Luke lifted his head and his expression sharpened. "It is going to be hard to leave the whole Corridor out," he muttered. "The Corridor lies between the two factions, Clyde."

"First side to set foot on my graze becomes my enemy," Clyde stated flatly. "Until then, I'm on neither side."

Charley Ross, top dog of the Big Bend outfits, strolled up with curiosity and devilment a bright shine upon his round, quick eyes. "Damon and Pythias," he boomed jovially. "What happens when you two find yoreselves on different sides?"

"That ain't going to happen," Luke growled at him.

"Even if it did, we'd still be friends," Clyde said. His gaze answered Ross's mockery. "That would be something kind of hard for the Bend to understand."

"What?" Ross barked, feeling contempt in Clyde's voice.

"That what's to be gained doesn't set the base of a man's friendship," Luke told him softly.

Ross darkened, cussed, and swung away with an angered step. Luke chuckled and they had a few more drinks and spurdragged out into the thickening sea of night. They stood on the edge of the stoop watching the stars pop out over the rolling soot line of the horizon. Clyde sensed the trouble in Luke and knew the reason.

"If things come to a head and Treadway moves against me," he said finally, "I will know it was not by yore urging, Luke."

Luke said explosively, "Damn it, I didn't want this! I have seen these wars before. Everybody is going to gain, but everybody loses, and there are feuds and hardship and bitter scores to be settled for ten years after." He turned and looked at his friend. "Stay out of it, Clyde. Yo're the only one cool enough and tough enough to stand things off. Nobody is going to make a real move until they see where you stand and who yo're siding. They didn't figure you'd be home and nobody hankers to fight you."

"Stop fretting," Clyde grinned. "As long as I stand neutral and hold the Corridor, nobody can get at anybody else!"

"Yeah, Ada will stand solid with you,"

Luke considered. "But what about Miss Jessica?"

Clyde gave a deep chuckle of real humor. "She's more like to be running a prayer meeting than taking sides! It is her idea that the range should run by the Golden Rule!"

Luke lifted him a sharp probing look. "You sure found out a heap about her in short order!"

"Enough," Clyde chuckled, "to tell you she's got a mind all of her own."

Luke growled and switched the talk to local weather and range conditions for a spell and then walked Clyde around to the Means stable while he hired a horse. They rode to the fork together, taking their separate ways into the night. The Corridor opened before Clyde, a broad and broken uptilting slant of country bordered by hills and bluffs, and acting as a ladder between a prairie and desert sink and high table country that sprawled out into mountain valleys. The river made its big bend up on that table and the richer grass was up there, but the winters were harsh and treacherous and the Bend ranchers had long nursed a jealousy of the warmer lowlands for winter grazing. In reverse, the lowlands had too much heat and drought in summer, and eyed Big Bend grass with envy, and only the three ranches holding the Corridor had staved off trouble for twenty years. Treadway belonged to none of the three groups, his spread being a pocket of sloping lands within an island of disconnected and upthrown hills that jutted out of the lowland. He had a good rich spread, but ambition was a corroding acid in him, and only old Moffett's rugged independence and Clyde's determination to hold the Corridor free of alliances had kept him from pushing a half circle up to Big Bend grass.

He saw a light in his bunkhouse and sent his trail call in ahead, and riding in he found he had only old snag-toothed Ellery and a smooth-faced kid named

Donohue left of his usual five riders "Where's Rod?" he demanded on a rough note.

Ellery and Donohue moved awkwardly. Rod had been top rider, foreman in Clyde's absence, and had moved out a week before with Jerry and Tripper, his two best cowhands. "I've got an idea they traveled towards the desert," Ellery growled.

"Sold out on me, eh?" Clyde snapped. "Well, I don't want that kind of men! Any of my stock mosey off with 'em?"

"No," Ellery said. "But we were ready for it if they tried it, forted up in that south pass."

Clyde gave a man's hard-bitten grin of appreciation deeper than his anger. Ellery was sixty if he was a day, and Donohue was a physically tough-knit kid, but not dry behind the ears yet. Neither would be much help if real trouble spilled through the Corridor, but their solid loyalty was a thing that reached through a man and plucked chords of feeling in him.

CHAPTER TWO

Tall in the Saddle

A WEEK passed while Clyde was getting the feel of his own range. There was sign, and plenty of it, that both the desert bunch under Venter Elb, and the Poverty Gulch outfit of cutthroats had looked over his grass with something on their mind beside exercise, but for some reason, except at the fringes, they had not moved in.

He rode over to see Ada and found her roiled up like a rattlesnake. He didn't need to ask the reason. Her cousin Jessica was packing, and a wolf would have frozen in the chill between the two.

"Well," he grinned at Ada, "let's have it."

"Oh, that fool! That damned idjit of a dude girl without sense enough to take

advice!" Ada raged. She said it loud enough for Jessica to hear inside, and he heard the New England girl's sharp gasp. "She has gone and ordered no guns on her place, and all her hands except old Whitey and Marsh have walked out flat!"

Jessica paused in the room inside and said acidly, "As long as you mean for me to hear what you say, I might as well answer, Ada Tait. First, it is about time somebody brought some peaceful ways around here, and second, it would seem to me it is my business what I order on my own ranch!"

"Oh, it is, is it?" Ada lashed back hotly. "With range trouble building and us in the middle! If you want to know how much it is exclusively yore business, it means I've got to put five more hands to riding line!"

"To protect me, I suppose?" Jessica mocked icily.

"To protect myself, you zaney," Ada told her. "We're in the Corridor. We are the Corridor, between Big Bend, Poverty Gulch, Desert and the Treadway ranges. Any sneaks or raids any of them pull will have their riders cutting across our grass."

Jessica sniffed. "I haven't seen signs of any trouble, but it's all you people talk about. I think you just want to see it, and you're mad I'm not going to let my men add fuel to it."

Ada rasped, "She will have to learn the hard way, but we'll have to pay the price, Clyde." She made a thrusting gesture as if to put the matter from her mind. "Stop grinning and get the steam out of yore spout," she grumped.

"Well, it looks to me as if I've been dealt out of this," Clyde said. "And that would mean you too, even if Luke hadn't told me. The boys started to move in on my fringe both north and west, and then stopped dead." He rolled a smoke and looked at her inquiringly. "How would you figure that?"

"Same as you," she said, "and it cuts sign. Somebody has lined up those two bad crews to do their dirty work and is giving orders. That would be Treadway."

She stared off at the hills that rolled copper and rusty and red of crest against the golden sky. "But why does he leave us out of it?"

"Mebbe he don't want to bite off more than he can chew," Clyde said. "Or mebbe he is just stalling, but don't want us to side the Big Bend outfits."

"Well, he can count on me for that until I'm forced to!" Ada said. "I wouldn't trust Treadway against a sunset, but those Big Bend boys are rough and hungry, and they would like any excuse to move into the Corridor for keeps."

She was reminded of Jessica's pious move and sent a glare toward the door. "She has helped things a lot in that direction! They can run a stampede through here without losing a cow, let alone a man!"

"What if they did?" Clyde asked.

"I'll pile the trail full of their danged carcasses if they come on my grass!" Ada answered.

"You can fan 'em through to my place," Clyde said. "And I will keep 'em running for the desert."

"No," Ada told him. "I have taken my stand. I mean to keep clear of this, but I'll not be pushed around."

Ada looked ready to boil up and Clyde cut her outburst with a grin. "Stop simmering," he advised. "Nothing's happened yet!"

"It will now, you can bet!" Ada growled stubbornly. "As long as the Corridor was solid out of this, we made it hard. Neither of the bunches want us with the other. But now Jessica's opened the bag at one end."

"Well, wait and see," Clyde told her. He glanced out at the twilight stealing out under the brilliant sky. "Is Miss Jessica leaving before supper?"

"If I can help her, she is," Ada nodded and gave him a penetrating look. "I suppose you feel called upon to escort her?"

Clyde looked awkward. "You would expect me to, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she nodded. "But not if she were seventy!"

She made a face and called to a waddy to bring around the buckboard and she stood with one arm resting against a porch post, watching night rise out of the sun-down sky. She pivoted suddenly, and he was startled by the fiery glow of her eyes against the dusk. Her mouth opened for speech, but she said nothing. After a moment the fire in her eyes died and she swung from him with silent temper.

The waddy brought the buckboard up and Jessica's sharp steps sounded at the door. She came out of her room, aloof and cool and self-righteous, pulling on a glove. "I am sorry, Ada," she said formally. "When you've come to your senses, let me know."

Ada answered on a metallic note, "I will send a coyote carrying a live chicken in its mouth." She gave her cousin a long, contemplative look. "If you aim to stay west," she added, "you had better learn about the country." She looked around at Clyde. "Will you and Ike fetch her trunks?"

Clyde loaded up and tied his horse for trailing and helping Jessica to the seat, hopped up and took the ribbons. He felt a hostility in Ada. He slapped the reins with that feeling still in him, and was still thinking of it when Jessica said stridently, "She's jealous!"

He looked at her silhouette against the night and her chin was very determined. "That was not the reason for yore fight," he said.

"No," she admitted. "She was trying to run my ranch."

"Ada's a purty smart rancher," Clyde told her.

"I don't know about being smart," she

said loftily. "I only know the Golden Rule usually works, and that peace is as easy to find as trouble."

"Not around here," Clyde said.

"Oh, is that so?" she demanded. "That is what my foreman Whitey said when he meant to drive some Big Bend strays off into a drygulch. But when I rode over and told Charley Ross he had strays on my grass, he had men over that same day to round them up, and he was decent about it as you could expect. Even offered to pay me for their graze."

"He did?" Clyde muttered. "Now they are really trying to buy us, aren't they?"

She turned on him. "Why do you have to look at everything that way?" she demanded. "Don't you believe that anyone is decent?"

HER temper froze, drained, and left flurried disturbance in its wake.

She turned abruptly from him, but her breath was short and fast. "If only you didn't have that hard streak in you!" she murmured.

"Mebbe you'd soften a man's harshness," he said.

The thread of a cry wove through her voice. "I wish I could believe it!" she whispered. "But you'd never give a woman a chance!"

"Well, let's see," he said. "I will give you a chance to prove yore way."

They jogged up a long, easy grade and turned along the edge of a low table that undulated off into starwash. They dropped into a coulee and he reined up at a corral as Whitey, her foreman, put a shotgun back inside the bunkhouse and came toward them.

The girl moved into the shadows of her porch with Clyde and he felt her closeness and pulsing warmth spread through him. He said huskily, "Mebbe a man alone gets harsher than need be, Jessica."

She looked at him with a softness in her eyes. "Don't let your violence come

between us, Clyde. I don't expect you to be a sissy, but be a little gentle, a little human."

"That is not very much to ask of a man," he muttered. He looked down at her, his feelings bittersweet and surging.

She felt the impact of his possessiveness, and the force of his feelings stilled her. He said goodnight as gently as he could, but she could hear the reckless pound of his gallop as he left the coulee.

He rode into town and found Charley Ross at Loving's. "Why, it's old chief Take-No-Sides himself!" the Big Bend rancher grinned. "Belly up and have a drink, boy!"

Clyde moved into the bar, conscious of mocking humor deep in Ross's eyes. Ross looked around him at Jessica's former riders, standing ill at ease, half defiant, down the bar. "Boys, have a drink," he called at them, "and this ain't off your wages, either."

Clyde's attention sharpened. "So you hired a woman's help away from her?" he grunted.

"Now," Charley Ross laughed outright, "don't get ornery where there's no cause, Clyde. No self-respecting cowhand would stay on anywhere after the orders she done gave 'em. They quit and they weren't working for anyone when I hired 'em."

Clyde turned and frowned at them. "Why didn't you come to me and Ada?" he demanded. "At least you could have stayed working in the Corridor."

The men dropped their gazes before the hard fire of his eyes, but the way they looked at each other was its own answer. One of them grunted finally, "It weren't pussonal, Clyde. We jist figured you'd be sore we quit her no matter what the reason, and things are getting too tight to stand off without taking sides."

Charley Ross laughed gruffly, "So they picked the right side, Clyde." He lifted his glass jovially, but his eyes mocked the other. "Take a heap of restraint for a

man to stay neutral when he's smack betwixt two warring sides."

Clyde gave him a flinty look of grudging acknowledgement. "You have scored, Charley, but yo're not squeezing me. The Corridor is standing neutral in this, and I pity the first man figures otherwise!"

Charley Ross made circles with the dampness of his glass. "Sometimes a body meaning too much good will pull the plug on trouble," he said philosophically. "Miss Jessica appears to be a mighty Christian lady, but a psalmbook ain't a handbook on ranching, Clyde."

"Mebbe it could be," Clyde suggested truculently. "Mebbe at that she has struck just what's needed here!"

Clyde laid a coin out for his own drink. He turned and moved out with temper in his step. He heard the rancher's soft, chuckling comment, "Why, who'd have thought it?"

He angled across the street for Lawson's bar and found Luke there, drinking apart from his own outfit, a man filled with conflicting thoughts and loyalties and not able to choose a course he thought right. Luke shoved along his private bottle, but did not look at Clyde directly.

Clyde poured a drink. "How do you have things figured?"

"Same as anyone who can add two and two," Luke growled. "Miss Jessica holds the Big Bend end of the Corridor, and not a gun betwixt the two riders she has left. There ain't nothing atall to stop a big bunch of them Big Bend doggies from straying onto her grass, and Big Bend riders will be spilling all over the landscape."

"Mebbe I'd have something to say on that!" Clyde challenged.

Luke gave a grunt of mixed jealousy and derision. "When you turn a man back you've got to be wearing hardware, mister, and don't tell me yo're going to make war agin her own say-so on Miss Jessica's grass!"

Clyde said with a hard edge, "You have got the Corridor and Big Bend all figured. Mebbe you've got the Desert and Gulch outfits, and yore own boss, figured out as well?"

Luke scowled and crackled his knuckles with irritation. "Treadway still don't hanker to breast you and Ada if he can help it, Clyde. But he ain't to sit idle and let Big Bend start drifting their cattle so that if it comes to fighting, he's got to fight clean back through the Corridor to get at 'em."

"Mebbe you ought to go have a personal talk with Miss Jessica," Clyde suggested.

"To put you in right and let you run the show?" Luke asked hotly. He pulled his temper in check with an effort. After a space, he reached the bottle and filled both their glasses. "I'm still a friend, I always will be, Clyde, but I ain't a fool and you didn't miss any time on that stage ride."

"Anything wrong with what I've said or done?" Clyde demanded.

"Yes, there is," Luke told him bluntly. "You ain't the man for a girl like that and you should know it. She likes things small and easy-going and peaceable. But yo're tough as rawhide and when you get around to it some day, you'll go over this whole range like a stampede and end up lording it—or in boothill."

"Mebbe I've changed my ways some," Clyde considered.

"You ain't changed since you was ten and set out to break a killer mustang singlehanded," Luke growled.

They had their drinks in silence, still friends, but feeling the play of forces and feelings beyond their full control dropping like a winter wind between them. They had some casual talk, and then drifted, Clyde riding home with raw grit in his veins, with Luke's talk and Charley Ross's jibe, and the girl, and her Golden Rule all simmering in him.

HE GOT to thinking first that Jessica had gone high wide and handsome with her peace and piety, but then he got to thinking that she had not gone as far as others were ready to go in the opposite direction, and by gum, he was beginning to see some sense in the Golden Rule—but it would have to come by degrees.

He got home near dawn, ate a solid breakfast and then took a fresh horse across his range. Gathering Donohue, he headed up through the creases of the up-tilting country. "I saw Big Bend, Desert and Treadway men in town tonight," he said, "but not a one from Poverty Gulch. I have an idea we'll find something stewing."

They topped a rise and looked down on a small herd grazing around a canvas-topped wagon. This was Clyde's grass but those were not Clyde's cattle, nor Corridor men. He put a hard consideration upon Donohue. "What I should do," he allowed, "is ride them down and give them a rope hauling. But mebbe fists would do as well. Son, you feel like warming up yore knuckles?"

Donohue's taut face broke with a young man's grin of buoyant confidence. He knew nothing about killing, but this was something different. "Fists?" he asked with suppressed excitement. "Boss, I could make them crawl to the Cimarron with one hand tied behind me!"

Memory of his own younger days touched the corners of the rancher's mouth and then he dropped downgrade with a harsh command at the greasy-haired, shifty-eyed gulchers who froze with rifles in their hands at his voice. They were astride and he said roughly, "Hit dirt!" and saw the grayness streak their bearded faces and the forced bravado waver in their eyes.

The bigger opened his mouth to argue and found himself staring into Clyde's gun.

"Hit dirt, I said," Clyde rasped on a flattened note. "And toss aside yore hardware."

They obeyed and the bigger man rasped hoarsely, "Give us a chance, Clyde! These ain't yore cattle!"

"But it happens to be my graze," Clyde grunted. He looked the scrawny, ancient *ladinos* over. "Don't tell me you brung those boneheaps in here for fattening!"

"Elb figured you didn't have enough riders to stop the Big Bend boys if they got started," the man rasped. "But if we saw 'em heading a drive down through here, we could stampede these useless critters into 'em and mebbe turn 'em until Treadway got here."

"Treadway, eh?" Clyde bit out, and humor floated on his eyes. "So he got you thieving nesters to front for him like suckers and he figured to come in unexpected from the side!"

The man had said more than he meant to and was now half in fear of what Clyde might do to him, half in fear of what Treadway or Elb would do if they learned what information he'd spilled.

Clyde nodded at Donohue, and saw the pleased excitement on his face as he swung out of the saddle. "You, Shorty," he commanded the smaller of the two men. "Stand clear and wait yore turn."

"Turn for what?" the bigger man croaked.

"Donohue, here is going to teach you about trespassing," Clyde told him.

"No cactus drags!" the man yelled thickly. "Clyde, we didn't even figure you in this!"

"You can figure now and tell yore boss if yo're able," the rancher told him grimly. "But it ain't a cactus drag yo're getting—it is just a taste of Donohue's fists."

The Gulchers looked dumbfounded and disbelieving. Even smashed and ripped and pummelled into bloody pulps, they could not believe this was the worst Clyde meant to do. The boy moved like an oiled

ram, not vicious, but thrilled at the contest, giving them every sporting chance, but leaving them sprawled and gasping, and still expecting a real finale.

"Leave enough of them to hike," Clyde told him and moved his horse haunching against their wagon, putting it rolling down a grade. The grass was green here and he put a match to the canvas, leaving it blazing, then hazed their horses into the cattle and put the herd hightailing.

He rode back to the beaten, bloody pair of men. "Tell yore pardners to keep clear of the Corridor hereafter!" he said sharply.

"Yeah," the big one growled sullenly, taking courage from the fact that he could still talk. "We'll tell Elb, but mebbe he won't think it's so funny."

Violence came up through Clyde like a whirlwind and he leaned to strike his quirt across the man's face. Then he thought of the girl and his violence sloughed off into arrogant contempt. "There is something else you can tell Elb," he snapped. "Tell him you gave me the angle on Treadway."

The man turned a sick gray beneath his slashed and battered face, knowing that Elb's punishment would be more vicious and lasting than this honest licking he'd been given. Clyde wheeled his horse and led off across chopped and broken country.

On toward evening they climbed up a long, liver-colored slope and passed through a saddle, and on a shelf beyond came on three gaunt Desert men, part of Elb's private outfit.

One started to pull a carbine from his scabbard, but Clyde's gun barked. The man cursed and dropped the gun and gripped a bleeding hand. One of the others eyed the incident with sour speculation. "That ain't so tough," he commented, "but it ain't so gentle as Elb told us, either."

Clyde laid a hard flat look upon him.

"Elb's doing more talking than showing," he grunted. "Where is he?"

The man looked desertward. "Likely home figuring."

"Tell him," Clyde said, "that he can begin figuring that the next foreign cow I find on my grass is likely to be dead . . . unless he'd rather have a few dead hombres instead."

The man flicked his two partners a look and reached a quick decision. "Not us, Clyde," he said. "Elb said you weren't in this. We're leaving pronto."

"You can tell Elb, and Treadway too, they put me in this when they began using the Corridor for a side alley."

"Yo're siding Big Bend?" the leader grunted.

"I'm taking on any man or outfit who tries to crowd the Corridor," Clyde told him. He gave them a hard penetrating look until they lifted their reins and turned down-country.

A half hour after sundown he dropped from the long roll of a grade into the thick dusk of a valley and riding toward the orange glow of a low fire sent the call of a hoot owl trilling. Ellery's voice came back and he moved into the circle of light letting down the hammer of a rifle. They hunkered at the fire for supper and Clyde ordered the old man off to St. Joe to find new riders, damning the bunch who'd quit him.

CHAPTER THREE

Hombre from Hell

NOTHING whatever happened for a week. There were no threats, no scares, no drum of hoofbeats in the night, no warnings. Word had gone out that Clyde meant to hold the Corridor, and it looked like he was a one-man stalemate between the hungry factions. Nobody wanted to pitch into him directly, and as long as he held the Corridor, the

highlanders and desert men could not get at each other.

At the end of the week, Ada said with a relief that was almost complete, "Well, Clyde, you son of a gun! Yo're just too danged tough to breast and the boys are cooling, and soon this whole danged business will simmer down."

"Mebbe," he agreed, "but it is still touchy."

She gave him a long, speculative look. "I was afraid for a spell you'd been too easy on those scurvy nesters and being the sidewinders they are, they would take it for weakness and get chesty."

"I wasn't too sure myself," he granted.

"You weren't?" she murmured and from that brief admission read a story and her eyes turned opaque as coal. "Being easy wasn't yore own idea, then?"

He darkened and did not meet her gaze. "Well, somebody else set me thinking," he muttered.

She gave a scoffing blast of breath. "I'll say to you that yo're one damned fool if you let another person do yore thinking for you, Clyde Savage!" Her eyes bored into him and then she pivoted and moved away.

He frowned and glanced around the town, feeling its curiosity intent upon his slightest expression or movement. The range remembered his violent roots, the molten iron in him when crossed, but something new was in him now.

He felt suddenly edged at Ada's censoring, and angled across to Lawson's. Luke was there, looking ornery and gloomy.

Luke said somberly, "Howdy, One Man Army! Looks like yo're almost a peace powwow in disguise but can't paddle good sense into one small lady."

He sounded raw and grudging and Clyde said metallically, "Let's leave one small lady out of this!"

"Yeah?" Luke rasped. "Just how? Or do you figure to blame Treadway's Bar-T

for something it had nothing to do with?"

"What are you jabbering about?" Clyde scowled. "I figured Bar-T about ready to simmer down along with everybody else."

"We were!" Luke grunted hotly. "Until yore handsome neighbor and ally saw fit of herself to rent Elb grazing rights and trail rights through the Corridor."

"What?" Clyde barked.

"You don't know?" Luke grunted with a mocking grin. "Why, mebbe you make her too rattled to tell you what she's up to, Clyde! There's a section of open graze runs along the foot of the bluffs from the desert, past Ada and you and Treadway on the other side and comes up smack agin a spur of the old Moffett place. Elb sold her the idea she didn't have riders to work her stock, and he'd work one herd for her if she let him bring his own stock onto that spur."

"If yore lying, I'll have yore tongue for this!" Clyde bit out savagely.

Acid humor floated to the surfaces of Luke's eyes and played there. "Now that don't sound Golden Rule at all," he mocked him. "It sounds like old Clyde. All right, brother, go ask her for yoreself, but jist keep this in mind. This was all hatched up between Elb and her. Bar-T was ready to take a peaceable standoff after you got back, figuring no gain, but no losses either, from Big Bend moving down and crowding."

"Now tell me Bart-T is going to stand neutral no matter what happens!" Clyde scoffed.

"No, I ain't said that," Luke growled. "Treadway ain't a fool. If trouble starts, he's got the same right as anybody else to dive in where he can to come out top side of it. But I'm saying flat, this wasn't his idea, Clyde, and things would have quieted down if you'd put the same time figuring a way to hold the Corridor together as you did into talking moonlight!"

Clyde's eyes sharpened, and truculence came between the two. The room did not

hear the conversation, but it caught the sudden stiffening of their bodies, the rising of their hackles, the smell of challenge and elemental feelings. The range riders read the sign and cut their own pattern of a story, and it was pretty close to facts, considering.

Clyde said with difficulty at restraint, "Luke, we been friends a long time, but this is something different."

Luke dropped his head with agreement. "This, and trouble if it comes, boy. I ain't ever going to stab you in the back, Clyde, but I am going to do my best to lick you, and just figure what has happened as part yore fault for trying to grab off too much territory. She made that deal with Venter Elb partly just to show you she could do it, same as she gave those orders for no guns."

"It is easy to put the blame on a man yo're jealous of!" Clyde told him through thin lips.

Luke met the slashing hardness of Clyde's gaze without flinching. "I don't have to stop there," he grunted. "Venter wouldn't have dast made this deal if you hadn't gone soft in the way you treated his men and if he didn't figure she had changed you. If you'd stuck to Ada, where you belong, none of this would have happened."

Clyde's eyes flamed but he said nothing.

"Go right ahead," Luke rasped. "Make a damn fool of yoreself all around!"

It wasn't in Clyde to apologise, but he said thickly, "Don't get the idea anything will roil me into taking sides. But I aim to stand dead weight atop that Corridor, and you can pass the word I'm not fighting easy any more."

A spark, almost a smile, broke through the brooding cloudiness of Luke's gaze. He growled, "That is more like it. I don't mind losing to you, you damned wild mustang, but I would mind like hell losing to a man who'd gone mealy."

They glared at each other, but they

noded as Clyde pivoted on one heel to leave. For all their anger and jealousy over the girl differences, they stayed friends beneath it, and the onlookers caught that. "Damon and Pythias," Charley Ross puzzled when he heard the details. "Those two could kill each other and still be friends about it."

Clyde crossed through day's blazing hot light and hit leather. He put up dust all the way to Ada's, spotting her and signaling her two miles across the range to join him, and riding in brooding silence clean across his own place to Jessica's.

JESSICA met them at her door with the studied, satisfied calm of a person who has proven her own way. Ada leaned against the porch rail with a tight mouth and smoldering black eyes, beating her quirt hard against her leg.

She broke out finally, "If no man can handle you hereabouts, I dunno but what

I should take and stuff mud down yore face!"

"Take it easy," Clyde advised, feelings corroding in him, but feeling the impact of Jessica's closeness, and wanting to carry the force of calm and coolness.

Jessica's eyebrows made halfmoons. She moved with the satisfied rhythm of a well fed cat. "I thought," she murmured archly to Ada, "that a prime rule of ranching was pride of running yore own spread. I made a deal that is working very well for me and can't possibly hurt anybody else."

Ada flamed and exploded a lungfull of breath. "You danged little addlepatented idjit!" she said harshly. "Don't you know Venter Elb just used you to get a foothold in the Corridor without running afoul of Clyde?"

"I know somebody is herding my cattle until I can get new riders," Jessica retorted. "And even if he is crude, he was



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very courteous about the offer. I think Elb is right—he doesn't want any trouble, but you and the Big Bend ranchers are all down on the Desert and Gulch outfits just because they're poor and nesters."

Ada choked, her voice tightened down to a raw whisper with anger. "I can't stomach much more sweetness and light with all hell ready to pop! You tell her, Clyde."

Clyde looked grim, but licked his lips and pulled his temper in. "What you've done," he said, "is to move Treadway's outposts right up to Big Bend line and make the corridor a battle ground when the trouble starts. We're no longer neutral here—we don't even count!"

"What poppycock!" Jessica laughed tartly. "Elb is not even crossing your grass! How does this affect you, or anyone else?"

Ada gave her a long, furious look and then said edgedly, "I'm leaving before I pull her hair out, Clyde! I didn't know there were such downright blathering, conceited, idjits in our clan!" She nodded and moved quickly out to her horse and left the sound of her angry gallop drumming on their ears.

Clyde turned back and caught a paleness and an uncertainty on Jessica's face, but in a split second she had formed an inward decision and her smug look was back. "Ada always wanted to be a boy!" she said. "She's looking for Injuns who aren't there."

"They are there all right," Clyde said somberly, and leaned back against a post looking down at the coils of her hair. "Jessica, will you marry me?" he said softly.

Her face snapped up and he saw radiant happiness in her eyes, and then it was torn with realization and a hard anger broke all through her. "So you could take over this ranch and use it to start trouble?" she demanded.

"Mebbe there is still time to stand off

trouble," he said. "This ranch is only part of it, but it is the pressing part, the weak link. If the Corridor is locked solid and neutral, and picked its own feud with the Desert and the Gulch and cleaned those thieving longriders out before Treadway or the Bend get a chance to show their hands, I don't think either of them would risk a range war."

"How would that stop it, if they mean to feud, which I don't believe."

"They can't get at each other free and clear without using the Corridor," he told her.

"And you'd have it bristling with armed men?" she asked.

"More or less. Not many hereabouts want to take me on single-handed."

A shudder passed across her shoulders and her face showed something akin to loathing. "Because of those notches you got in the past? It is a wonder to me you didn't shoot those gulchers off your place the other day just for a little practice!"

"Mebbe I should have," he told her on a flatted note. "Mebbe a lot of people think I've lost my grit!" Anger pressured up within him and was silent until his mood shifted and he relaxed. "I didn't come here to argue, Jessica," he said. "I don't want any part of trouble that I don't have to take."

She looked down with disturbance. He could feel the conflict within her. "No," she murmured. "You're hard and cruel and violent just like the rest, Clyde! It's not being right that matters to you—it's your pride!"

He gave a hard laugh. "I have let my pride go to the devil! What I should have done was to ride down to the desert and knock the heads off the men who quit me, and give Venter Elb a dose of lead for hiring them away."

"You're just aching to find a reason to get into trouble," she persisted.

"No, I will stand neutral as long as circumstances let me," he answered. He

reached up a calloused hand and gently touched her hair. "And I will still want to marry you, either way."

He was gone then, leaving the gentle tone of his voice upon the air. She stared at the blob of his figure fading into darkness, and took a step forward to cry out his name, but the fast drum of his gallop drowned it.

"If there were only some peace in him!" she cried miserably. "I know my way's right, that you get good returned for good. I'll prove it; I'll make him see it my way!"

HE RODE back into town, feeling the need of the talk and noise of a bar as a background against which to straighten out his thoughts. He racked and went into Loving's, and saw Charley Ross and Tim Sturgess for the first time in several weeks.

They broke off their conversation to watch him, hard consideration shining in their eyes. Charley watched him raise his glass and then commented, "Seems to be a little difference of policy in the Corridor, Clyde."

For the barest instant, Clyde's glass was motionless at his lips, and he cursed himself and drank his drink, knowing they would read the sign rightly. He set it down and wiped his lips. "Didn't know about it," he answered. "We are all still standing clear of other people's feuds, I reckon."

"Maybe," Charley grinned.

Clyde turned to him and laid a bleak gaze on him. "What would you call it, Charley?" he asked softly.

Charley Ross juttied out his button lower lip and scratched his head. "I dunno, and that's what has me wondering. You get rustled of both men and cattle while yo're away, and you come back and don't do anything about it. Then you find outlanders crowding onto yore grass, and one bunch you just warn off and the other

yo're content to let go with a beating from a kid."

"Donohue knocked hell out of them," Clyde said.

"Then one of yore neutral outfits make a deal with the very bunch you and Ada have to watch out for—and you have not changed her mind, I will bet!"

Clyde's jaw hardened and he poured another drink.

Charley grunted, "I ain't asked you to come with us, Clyde, figuring the way you and Luke stand, and being content to take yore word that you are staying out of this. But the word I took was the word of a man I've known all my life, and fought with some, and could understand."

"You can understand this!" Clyde answered harshly. "Nobody is going to use my grass for a bridge, and nobody is going to force me into this!"

"Don't get roiled!" Charley drawled softly.

Clyde rode out home and hit the range at dawn with a throbbing head. He saw Donohue cross a break of the hills across a valley, and signaled him over with his gun. The kid was flushed with excitement and reported horseprints left late last night by the upper trail this side of Ada's line.

"Keep it under yore hat," Clyde ordered, "and ride over and see yore uncle Whitey on Miss Jessica's place. Tell him I want to know how much stock Elb's moved in, and who the riders are, and what the layout is."

The Kid was off at a gallop, and Clyde rode on to check with Ellery and his new riders, his mind on his own situation. Both Luke and Charley Ross had brought up his lack of iron and his old violence. Nobody was going to accuse him of being yellow, but it was going to be bad if they got the idea that the girl had softened him. The only hope of his staying neutral lay in the respect he had won upon the range for honesty and fairness, but for

ruthless violence when crowded. Maybe it had been a bad idea not to spray a little lead. Treadway's backing had given the Gulch and Desert boys an arrogance beyond their own courage, and now they were feeling their pride and out to make their glory.

He found Ellery, who had also cut sign on last evening's riders and who said now, "That was Elb's own outfit. One horse had a fore cleft hoof—that's the hoss Roy rode out when he quit."

Clyde's lips pulled out like wire. It was bad enough for his top rider to quit without warning to work for a sidewinder with Elb's stench in a range war. But to play his cards over his former boss's grass was something to be remembered and accounted for.

He had coffee and bacon and cold biscuits with Ellery, and made his rounds, and at sundown, holed up at a line shack, tired, doubtful of the rightness of his actions, uncertain about himself. Maybe he should have moved in on Jessica himself and taken over until the feud was finished; maybe he should have ridden Elb down and gotten tough with him for hiring his hands behind his back.

He rolled in a blanket in front of the fire and slept for a few hours. His sleep grew fitful and through it he heard the rapid tattoo of pounding hooves. The sounds rose and fell and died away, and even in sleep, his mind automatically identified the sounds as coming from the fast gallop of two horses on a hard trail.

The word trail stuck in him, rattling back and forth against his consciousness like an echo in a cave. He sat up suddenly, senses keyed and wide awake. The only hard trail was the Corridor trail running across his place. The only riders with any right upon it were his riders, and there could not be a pair of them—his fences were too thin.

He threw open the door and stood listening, but he could cut no sign. The

usual night noises were subdued, and beyond them was only silence. Riders galloping in haste could fade out in a brief spell, but he could not be certain.

He moved back to the fire and stirred the coals and put his coffee pot on.

"I got addled," he admitted to himself, "and let a woman change me. It was a fool thing to do in any case. A woman must take a man the way he is or not at all; it is not the way of a man to change."

He looked to his gun and buried his fire and pulled on his hat. "It is high time to make up for this softness," he told himself. A hard smile pulled at his lips. He moved to the door and stepped out into the damp coolness of night. The moon was overhead and he judged it was about eleven o'clock and turned through the space between the line shack and the corral.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet Brand

THE sting of a heavy bullet thudding into the drop bar made him let go and he melted in his tracks as the sounds of the gun reached him. A second bullet followed, going wide; the sound came from another hill. He rolled and snaked for the deep shadow of the wind-break as hoofbeats drummed off towards the desert.

He saddled his horse, scowling and trying to figure this out. It looked as if somebody had been set to bushwhack him, but it was a hell of a distance to try from at night. Maybe it was just a warning, or maybe it was meant to stir him up—but for what reason?

He climbed into leather and put his horse into a long run cross country for Ada's place. There was a light in the main house but it went out instantly at his call. He sat waiting until her query sang back and then rode in at her relieved, "Come on in!"

She had the coil oil lamp lighted again when he came through the door. She was dressed, and she turned to smile at him with mixed anxiety and relief, and for just an instant, he soaked in the picture of the yellow light slanting a line across the strong, plain beauty of her range-burned face. He felt the tightness and the closeness of their old friendship, and the comfort of being near her when he was troubled.

"Thank God you came!" she cried huskily. "I was afraid you'd be out warring single-handed!"

His brows furrowed with puzzlement. "Over that potshot?"

"No," she said and studied him. "About Donohue's rope hauling. Don't you know?"

She saw he didn't and told him the story. The kid had been hunkered over beans with his uncle Whitey when two of the Desert outfit riding Jessica's lines came on them. Donohue had twisted and gotten his gun clear, but a slug tore it out of his hand. They had ridden Whitey down and hauled the kid off by one heel, leaving him for dead out on the trail.

Clyde's eyes narrowed and filled with thin threads of cold silver light. "What happened then?"

"Whitey trailed them and signaled for my riders and they found the boy and took him into town. Then Whitey went berserk and got his extra gun and lit out for the Desert. He was bawling and filled with mayhem and said the war was on for him!"

"The war's on all right!" Clyde grated. "And except for my softness this would not have happened. I should have shot Elb's men out of the country instead of letting them off with a licking from the kid."

Savage violence was rising through him and the girl put a quick hand on his arm. "Clyde, don't blame yoreself and go taking this fight on alone! Wait until the morning—wait for things to take form!"

"The kid was my man," Clyde told her grimly. "That rope-hauling was for the beating he gave Elb's crew at my orders. What would you expect me to do?"

"I could kill Jessica for bringing this on!" Ada said.

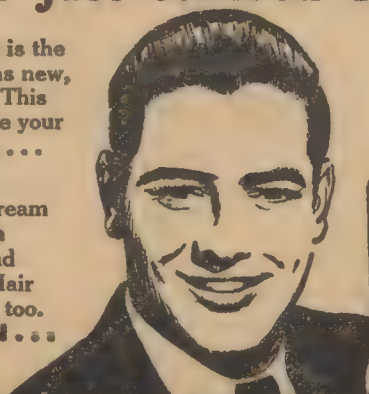
"No," he muttered, "it was my doing." He gave the half note of a mirthless laugh. "I was trying to act civilized and follow the Golden Rule!"

She looked at him steadily, and said on a heavy note, "She got under yore skin. You love her, Clyde."

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His jaws compressed. He made a gesture. He said grittily, "It wouldn't matter. I've got a war to settle."

She dropped her head with a decisive movement, and her tone gave no indication of the dampness on her eyes. "Count me in."

"No," he stated.

She gave him a fierce look. She said stridently, "This is my war too! The whole range is in this, Clyde!"

For a space she felt the resistance in him, then he gave a man's hard chuckle and squeezed her hand. "Still pardners, eh? All right, there is one thing you can do then, and it may be tough as sin."

She read him before he spoke and she paled, but her glance never wavered. She nodded and said on a bitter note, "All right, I will go sneak her through that snake nest and keep yore little precious from harm's way."

They gave each other a long, solid look and moved out to their horses. She turned from him, her hoof beats sinking into the deep shadows of the coulee while he took the trail up to the rim.

He reined up, cutting for sign, letting his senses drift out across the range. The war was on; a man could feel it. But there was sign as well. All over the range, camp fires cut red eyes in the night, and the hour's usual wall of stillness was crisscrossed by the rising and sinking drum of running horses. Somewhere towards the desert the darkness suddenly leapt aglow, and he thought, *Elb's shack—Whitey's lost no time.*

He put his horse into a lope across Tait grass, being challenged twice by Ada's riders, and coming into their fires to tell them to bunch and block anything coming through the corridor. Near her fence line he dropped off trail and traveled the thick shadows mid-way of the hills, and crossing his own line found old Ellery forted up and ready to hold the pass coming from Big Bend as long as he was able.

Bursts of running fire came abruptly from two directions, from the desert and from the Bend, sounding as if on Charley Ross's place. There was a lull in the firing and then a savage yell splitting the night, and from the tone of rage and mayhem, Clyde guessed some Ross man was down.

He rode up the side of the pass and listened intently. The range was alive with danger and disconnected sounds. Shots came sporadically from the Bend. Somebody had tried a sneak or raid and was trapped in darkness, and a manhunt was on. Intermittent heavy firing came from the desert, and now a burst of hoofbeats reached out from Treadway's—the pulsing swell of many horesmen.

"Treadway's moving in," he thought grimly. "That puts me against Luke as well."

HE CLOSED his eyes and took a mental view of the country, with every hill and creek and trail etched precisely on his mind. The main fight would be either to stampede cattle as a ramrod on either side, or to get the whole war running in the Corridor. The Corridor was the key to this, the control point from which advantage could be pressed.

Dawn's chill drifted across the hills and the shadows turned fluid and uncertain. From one quarter a yell of pain and anger jarred across the range, and from another there was rapid shooting and a wild yell of victory. A glow was coming now from the direction of the Ross place, but this glow spread out, fanning, and began to lift a wall of brightness against the murky line of the horizon. That would be Tilting Meadow, the best sun-cured hay in the country, and in winter emergency about all the hay there was to feed the entire upper range.

A second later the air shook with the pound of hoofs, and from instinct he

knew another stampede was coming from Big Bend. He rode now standing in the stirrups, dawn's chill wind ripping at his chest, vest flaring and hat brim plastered back. Some sentinel sang out a challenge and put two shots his way and he let out his wild trail call as he moved past, putting shots right back.

Fresh dust hung in the air and shortly grew thick and choking. Sound was a furious booming noise from up ahead, and beneath his horse he could feel the ground quiver. The Desert and Gulch men were driving a stampede full tilt at Big Bend, and if Big Bend were coming this way with the same trick the two herds were sure to smash head on in a Rider's Meadow. It would be a dogfight as to which outfit got the upper hand amidst the carnage, and he felt a cattleman's instinctive hatred of the useless slaughter of good cattle.

It came then, the shuddering impact of two berserk herds smashing headlong into each other. Orange-red fingers stabbed the lingering night ahead of him, but the sound of shots was gobbled by the crash of five hundred opposing longhorns, and the berserk bawls of fear and tortured dying.

He felt his stomach knot and for an instant knew something between black fury and nausea, but there was nothing he could do immediately. He swung wide to a bluff overlooking the lower trails from Treadway's and Ross's. He jerked to a halt and hit dirt with his horse still rearing, conscious that the jangling sound of carnage in the Meadows was broken here and muted.

He listened and caught the pulse of running horses. Finding a boulder balanced on the rim, he cut sign on the rising swell of sound below and sent the boulder crashing down.

A yell came from below and the mixed sound of hard-reined horses, and then from the black silence Treadway's gruff voice

boomed, "That will be you, Clyde Savage!"

"Where's Luke?" Clyde called down.

"My job is here, boy, and I will stick it," Luke sang back. "I am still Treadway's foreman."

Clyde put another boulder crashing, and every bounce of the great stone was a weight of bitterness that bounced and crushed the feelings of friendship.

Dawn put its gray-rose smudge across the sky and he was still holding the Treadway outfit with boulders when the crack of a rifle came from above him and a bullet creased his clearcut silhouette. He melted and rolled into the clinging shadows of some brush, and from a hundred yards away heard Elb's harsh twanging yell, "Ride on by, Treadway, I've got him dry-gulched!"

"You would like to have!" Clyde grated and sent two shots slamming up towards Elb's voice.

Clyde snaked quietly up through a rain crease that gouged the grade, and cut sign on Elb, forted up like a man holding off an army, ready enough to shoot, but not so ready to get shot at. As Elb triggered he let another shot go, and Elb crashed down.

He stood over Elb's body thumbing in fresh bullets, a grim distaste staining all through him.

DAY'S light was fresh and clear and he could see and picture most of what had happened. The Big Bend outfits must have won control of the berserk herd in the Meadows and turned it upon Elb's men, and in the doing, caught Treadway's bunch before them just as they angled up into the Corridor. They had pressed the whole bunch downtrail before them, and the trail was littered with the pulpy blobs of carcasses, and now the fight was going on out of sight on the flats below, with the sounds telling that Treadway was being driven steadily back to the still lower ground and 'dobe ruins.

Treadway had thrown secrecy to the winds and was making a slow and costly retreat before the Big Bend outfits taking the company of Desert and Gulch nesters whom he had put up to this, now realizing the yellowness of men who will sell out for a dollar. The fight was at the edge of the flats, almost on the rim of the grade down to the bottom lands below.

Charley Ross rode out behind a hill and turned toward him, a wild and bloody figure of a man, stripped half naked by wild riding through brush and cactus, a headwound clear without his hat. He filled his hairy chest with breath to call across the flats.

He stared through morning's drenching golden light. "You gone plumb loco?" he demanded. "You can't fight everyone."

"I aim to do damned near that," Clyde warned him. "If yo're smart, Charley, you will get off this grass!"

He heard Ross mutter something and then nod at a carbine-toting rider. Clyde put spurs to his jaded horse and jumped it behind a break of ground as a shot whined directly behind him. He used the rises and the breaks of ground for cover and moved down trail at a rapid pace, passing through battered remnants of the stampede, and finding Ellery waiting at the lower pass.

Ellery grinned with relaxation and high humor, "By gawdamighty, I reckon they guessed wrong when they talked up either Treadway or Charley Ross for range-lord!"

"So far I only shot a snake," Clyde told him grimly.

"It ain't who you shoot as much as who shoots you," the old man said.

Clyde rode around to the earlier bluff and climbed out of the saddle, above the 'dobe ruins. Obliquely across from him the fight was working down a twisting, brushed and boulder-strewn trail, the cost of retreat and victory being just about man-for-man.

Treadway was hurt and Luke took over, taking his outfit down in a surprise retreat that brought the last of Bar-T and the Desert and Gulch men inside the crumbling 'dobe walls.

Clyde's and Ada's men began to gather on the bluff, and there were a few other neutral men, not wanting to take sides in any way, but ready to fight and die for their stand if need be. These were the men who sided Clyde when the Big Bend bunch tried to take their bluff for the drop it gave them. Clyde met them with the glacial warning, "Either side, I will drop the first man comes over that rim!"

The bunch argued and cursed Clyde but retired without shooting. The sun put its furnace blast blazing from the sky and day's heat began to thicken and press down upon the land. Sporadic shooting went on down below, and twice the Big Bend bunch charged and retreated with losses.

Ada rode in from somewhere with her white-faced charge in tow. She said, "Clyde, you've got to find a way to stop this! What is the use of it all now? Half the riders on this range are already crippled."

"Except possibly," Jessica put in stiffly, "those who pick on drunks and make brutes out of boys just for the thrill of it!"

He had opened his mouth to speak but now he closed it tight as a vise.

Ada turned on her with eyes hot as desert sunsets. "Mebbe you don't know you started this, Jessica, when you had yore men stop wearing guns," she said torridly.

The dude girl went dead white. It was not in her to be tough and it was not in her to accept a blame for wrong. "It seems you Westerners are great ones for putting the fault on other people's shoulders!"

But Ada was no longer listening. She was following Clyde's gaze to the far ravine that led up into Big Bend country.

The Ross rider was coming back on a fresh horse with a flatbed wagon following, and the whole wagon was piled with bags.

"Oats?" Ada queried with puzzlement.

Clyde shook his head. "Look at the wagon springs. Those are sand bags and they are not lugging sand way down here for fun, and saddlebags would be better for toting ammunition."

Ada studied the iron mask of his face and read the grimness and uttered the echo of his thoughts, "Dynamite!"

Her fingers dug into his arms like talons. "Not that—don't let them do it, Clyde!"

His lips formed a tight, mirthless smile at her trust. Counting Ada's men and other neutrals who would fight, he had fourteen men altogether. He could line the rim of the bluff and open war on either side below and he might have used that fact to force a deal when both sides were blood weary, but not now, with Ross holding that terrible force.

Inside the 'dobe walls, Luke had guessed the contents of the wagon, and his voice lifted in a raw, ragged yell upon the airs, "Stop that wagon! Drop them ponies!"

Hats poked over the crumbling wall, but blasts of fire from the coulee put them down. Only one blob of hatline poked in a cranny, and without seeing his face, Clyde knew it would be Luke.

"I will make a deal with you, Clyde

Savage!" Luke called up. "Come down and side me and we'll clean them sneaking murderers out, and then I will quit Treadway and throw in with you against all comers!"

The yelling from the coulee chopped dead still. Only the rasping moan of wounded broke through the taut silence. Ada whispered fiercely, "They're afraid of you, Clyde—do it!"

"I can't!" he muttered grimly. "I have given my word on this!"

He stood on the rim and made a gesture. "Luke, I can't do it. But I will take the second part of yore offer up and we'll drive every warring son down there scattering out of this Corridor."

"And I can't do that," Luke called back. "Not before I have whipped Big Ben—I owe Bar-T that!"

The two stood unmoving a moment, framed by silence and the unbending stubbornness of their words and prides, then Luke wigwagged and Clyde raised an arm in signal, and the highland bunch rent the plain with a rough yell. There was the burst of another explosion that gave them their range, and then three in rapid succession, and as dust cleared, a broad breach showed in the wall. Treadway men were beating for cover over the broken rumble, and Luke swung a running man by the shoulder with a curse to make him stop and help a wounded comrade.

A dynamite stick landed at a corner of

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the old hacienda, and there was a man's raw yell of agony from the rumble, and something like a spur glinted in the dust shower. Ross had sent in another powder stick and followed it with a blind fusillade, and men were stumbling and clawing and groaning all through the rumble.

Clyde gave a sweeping gesture to his fresh, taut-faced men to pull them in and ordered curtly, "When I signal put three fast rounds smack on that patch of hardpan in the middle."

They lined the rim and his arm lifted and cut the air, and the bark of their shots slammed out as one long roar. The shots pulverized the hardpan, sending a plume of dense, purple dust spouting high and curling into the white-hot glare, and with this dramatic warning he silenced both sides and froze their wild emotions.

He stood in an outcrop and cupped his hands and called down to them, "Big Bend and Treadway, yore both half crippled and you are fighting for no reason. Without the Corridor you've gained nothing, and not matter who comes off victor, we'll hold this Corridor and blast trespassers just like that hardpan!"

There was conversation on both sides, then Charley Ross sent up an ornery, unyielding laugh. "I'll take care of the Corridor after I've finished this!" he grated. "Keep yore peacemaking for yoreself, Savage—it is clear you've got no hankering to get in this!"

Clyde's breath sucked through his teeth and the light slashed off his eyes in silver sheets. "Then listen to this," he sang back with iron restraint toward Charley Ross. "Yo're hurt and so is Treadway, but Tim Sturgiss is still whole and so is Luke. Let them fight it out with a square duel, and save some grief for widows."

"And you'll be judge and jury?" Ross taunted.

"I'll fight the winner," Clyde called back, "and the winner of the three will set the range law!"

There was bickering among the Big Bend outfits, but Luke yelled up without waiting, "That is square for everyone! One ramrod agin another, and the winner clears dispute with the neutral!"

Ross growled from the coulee, "It's a trick! Why should I gamble when I have won?"

"Yellow, Ross?" Luke yodeled at him. "Or just plain gutless?"

Tim's voice rose on a hard grate, "I ain't afraid!"

"I'm coming down," Luke told them.

He pushed his horse down a wash and dropped onto the sparsely grassed floor. Men came out from both sides, grim and red of eye and snarling, but holding themselves in check to make arrangements. Both men would come out of their forts shooting and shoot as long as they were able or until one gave in. The signal would be the drop of a white handkerchief.

Clyde held the handkerchief out for all to see. "This is Ada Tait's," he stated grimly. "Is there any many thinks Ada would take part in a trick?"

No man there would lift his voice against her and the two groups rode back to their forts. Clyde took position against the bluff so both dualists could see him clearly. He lifted the white square high and counted.

Luke and Sturgiss came out yelling at full gallop and their guns began to bark. Sturgiss was weaving in the saddle, a wild and cunning look on his face. Luke threw down his gun and shot methodically. He winged Sturgiss in the left shoulder and the man jerked and grimaced, but his own shot dropped Luke's horse and sent Luke rolling.

Sturgiss let out a wild howl of victory and rushed the downed man with gun barking until there was only the click of metal. Luke came out of his roll, and glared at the white-faced rider. "Say the word and you can ride home for supper!" Luke told him with solid tones.

"No, damn it!" Sturgiss yelled and swerved his horse, and clawed for a second gun hidden under his shirt.

Luke took methodical, unflurried aim and fired. The rider's arm went high, his convulsing fingers pulled one shot into the air, and then with his howl running out like the passing of a flood's roar, he sank in upon himself and swayed and tumbled.

Luke stood watching him with smoking gun; he emotionlessly blew his barrel and thumbed in fresh shots. He holstered his gun and put a man's hard, tight smile across at Clyde.

Clyde nodded and looked up at the bluff. "Ada, I reckon you can do the count."

Ada swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes and sucked a deep lungfull of breath. "One!" she called on a dead, clear note, and from her fondness for them both and knowledge of a man's nerves at this grim moment, she drew the strength to keep her count in exact timing. "Two. . ."

"Three!" she called and they drew and fired and started toward each other, both deadly intent, both grim, and both smiling.

Luke tore Clyde's left shoulder open with his next shot and Clyde missed, but Clyde's next shot spun Luke like a top and sent him rolling.

Clyde threw down his gun and began running and of a sudden men began spilling from the 'dobe walls and coulee, and came streaming down the cliffs. Luke was breathing hard and Clyde knelt by him and cradled Luke's head upon his knee, unabashed and uncaring that all these people saw his emotion.

Luke forced a smile. "I was afraid you'd aim high when the showdown came."

Clyde shook his head. "I wouldn't have left you feeling skunky if yores had been the lucky shot," he said.

The grimness, the tightness, the worry, pulled out of Luke's expression. "Tough right through," he muttered thickly with

approval. "Tough enough to lord this hell-hole range like I always said," and then life left him.

Men stopped dead in their tracks and squinted skyward as they took off their hats, sensing by instinct a life passing, and unconsciously looking for the thing that cast this cold gray shadow. The dude girl was sobbing wildly, but now her sobs cut dead and she struck out her hand to ward off the impact of a terrible and black realism that would smother her.

"How could he?" she murmured, eyes stark and staring. "How could he smile as he shot down an old friend?"

Ada turned and looked at her with glacial cold, but her hard gaze threaded slowly with compassion. "They both smiled," she said heavily. "Smiled for the mangled bodies and broken hearts they were saving, and for finding their friendship deeper than a pretty face . . . deeper than a feud . . . deeper than their iron determination to shoot the other."

Charley Ross hobbled, strained and gray and quivering with realization of his part in this. "What did I have against Luke or even Clyde?" he muttered with a man's debasement. "Damon and Pythias—how could I let that happen between those two?"

"Jessica," Clyde said gently, "this is not the country for you."

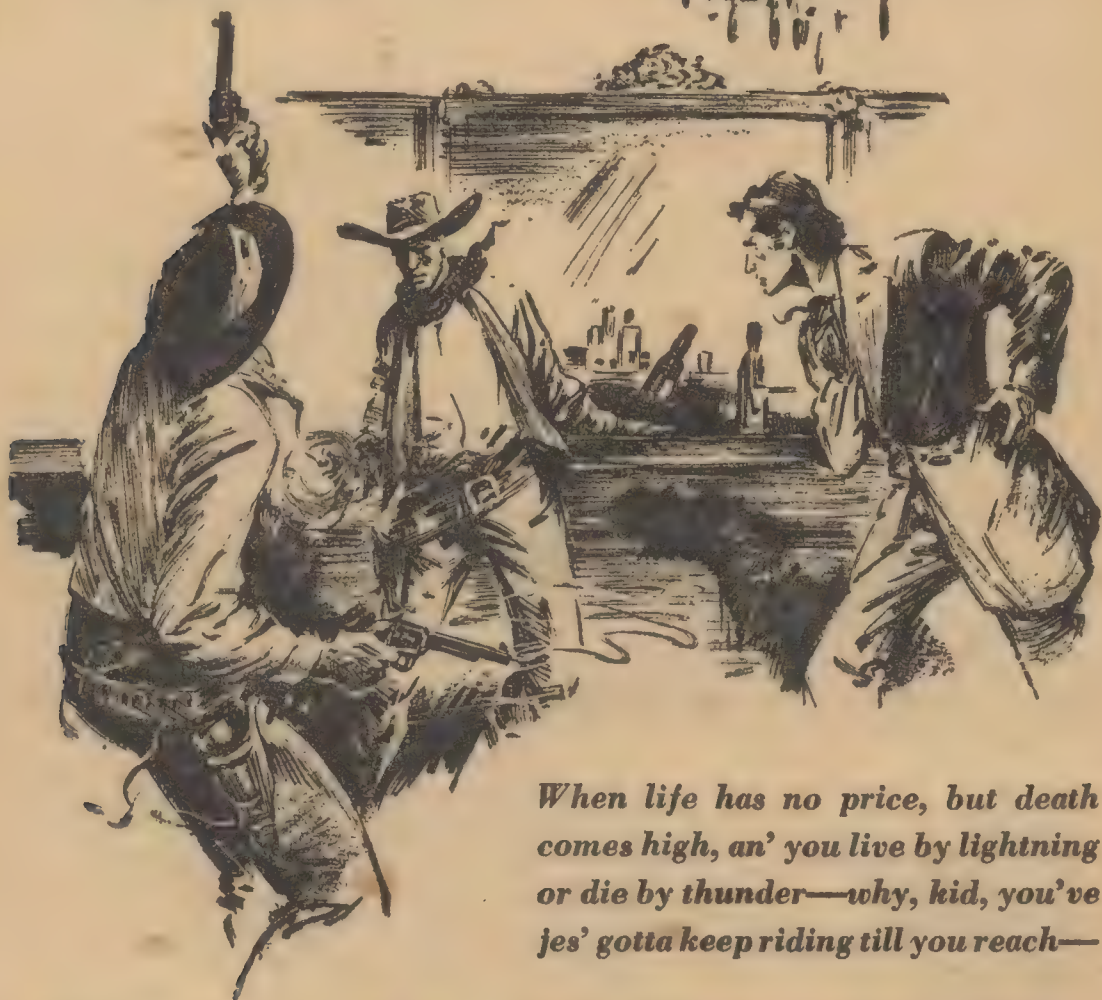
She bowed her head in abject acknowledgment, waiting for some accusation which never came from his lips. He looked at Charley Ross and said, "Charley, the war's over for now, and for good."

Clyde looked at Ada for a long space and then nodded as if admitting a long blindness. "Luke knew," he murmured. "I've been a fool."

He took her elbow and turned her toward their ponies. "There is a place," he told her, "Luke used to go sometimes to watch the sundown. I want you to ride out there with me, Ada. I want him to see us there so he knows."

By **DAN KIRBY**

Jess made his draw, smooth and fast,
firing from hip level. . . .



*When life has no price, but death
comes high, an' you live by lightning
or die by thunder—why, kid, you've
jes' gotta keep ridin' till you reach—*

GUNSTOP

JESS OAKES edged around a clump of river willows and stared down at the man lying prone at the edge of the backwater slough. The man was motionless. One hand lay wrist-deep in the muddy water, the other hand still clutched the forty-five that the man had whipped out of his tied-down holster

when the swamp rabbit had darted out from a pile of driftwood, giving Jess's presence away. There was a red welt across Jess's throat, testifying the speed and accuracy of the man's aim. But there was a hole in the man's chest and a crimson stain on the ground beneath him to further testify that the man had not

been fast enough. Jess holstered his own still warm gun and moved forward.

Jess thought the man was dead. He knelt down beside him and as he did, the man's hand loosened its hold on the gun, and he half rolled over. There was a smear of blood on his mouth, but his eyes were clear. He grinned at Jess.

"I woulda' shaded you on the draw, mister, had I been on my feet." The man's voice was low and steady.

Jess took the makings from the man's shirt pocket and rolled a smoke. He stuck it between his lips and lighted it, then wedged it between the dying man's own bloodless lips. He said, "It was a lucky break for me, stranger."

The man seemed satisfied. His eyes closed.

Jess thought, *I've heard of men like him. With both feet in hell the only thing that matters to him is that he was the fastest with a gun.* He looked from the man to the fire scorched range beyond. It had been a desperate, last-chance gamble by the small outfits. They had figured that firing the syndicate range would draw off the crew holding the river. Once they got possession of that trickling stream of brackish water they would have new life in their veins. But they hadn't reckoned on the syndicate's strength, hadn't realized that a combine like the syndicate could match each of their men with two first-class fighting men of its own. This man found it out too late.

Jess started to rise; eyes flicking briefly over the man he'd shot. The other was still looking at him, and a shiver ran up Jess's spine. The man had a forty-five slug square through his chest. He couldn't live. Why didn't he go out easy instead of lying there looking at Jess with that grin on his blue lips?

The man's voice croaked against the silence. "You're pretty good with a gun, yoreself, kid. What's the syndicate payin' you?"

Jess said quietly, "Two hundred and found. But it's over now. It never lasts very long. Can I get you a drink, stranger?"

The man didn't answer. There was a faraway look in his eyes. He said weakly, "I got a ranch a hundred and fifty miles from here. A good ranch with grass up to yore stirrups. Took me ten years to get the money together to buy it."

Jess looked at the man's feverish face and figured that he was delirious. In death he was seeing the little spread he had thought he wanted in life.

"Sure, mister," Jess said softly. "I'd like to have a ranch like that. That's what I'm savin' my money for now."

The dying man eyed him steadily and started to speak when a coughing spell racked him. After a moment he said, "Hell, you're just like me. Just like me. Got a pencil and a piece of paper on you, fella?"

Jess knew there was no way to help the man; all he could do was humor him for his last few minutes. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a pencil stub and an old envelope. "You want to send a message to someone?" he asked.

The man's lips twisted into a grin. He said, "Me? Hell, I got no folks. Write this: I hereby give my ranch on Medicine Creek on Tabletop range to—what's yore name, fella?"

Jess licked his dry lips. "Jess Oakes," he said.

"To Jess Oakes," the man concluded. "Now let me sign it."

Jess handed him the pencil and paper. The man struggled to a half sitting position and laboriously scrawled his signature on the bottom of the envelope. He said, "I was aimin' to throw a sod dam across that dry draw. Sometimes the creek runs dry. Won't cost much. You—" The pencil stub slipped from his fingers.

Jess stood up and walked slowly away from the pool of water. Halfway to where

his roan was tied behind the river willows, a vague notion stopped him and he turned back to where the dead man lay. He took the envelope from the man's limp fingers and looked at the signature. It was Ira Turner, but the name meant nothing to Jess.

He dropped the envelope into his shirt pocket and walked to his horse.

Jess rode north for seven days. He rode alone, as he always did, all of his possessions in his saddle bags and bed roll, the last syndicate pay envelope in his money belt with the others he'd earned. Two thousand dollars, a good Colt forty-five, a horse, a saddle and a bed roll. That was what he had to show for twenty-four years of living. And three of those years at gunfighter's pay.

He'd taken his time on the trail, moving toward the high country with the coming of warm weather. He'd done some thinking of a night around the campfire. Thinking about the ranch he was aiming to buy and how it would be to settle down and take root. To step out of his own house and see land that belonged to him. He reckoned he'd like that, and when he thought about the last three years and the men he'd killed, it didn't seem so futile and pointless. It was the only way he had of getting ahead.

H E RODE into the little mountain town before noon the next day.

It was a sleepy, nondescript little town, but the broad valleys and grassy foothills had caught his eye. It was good country. He pulled up at the hitch rail in front of the saloon and dismounted stiffly. He stamped the chill of the morning cold from his feet and adjusted the weight of the holstered gun on his thigh. He looked over his shoulder and saw the girl standing across the street. She was standing in front of a window and the sign on the window read: MEDICINE

CREEK WEEKLY RECORD. The girl was staring at him.

He returned the girl's stare idly, and started to move toward the saloon. Then he remembered and turned around to look again at the sign on the window across the street. That man he'd buried back on the syndicate range, Ira Turner, had said he was from the Table Top Range. He'd talked about a ranch on Medicine Creek.

The girl who had been staring at him seemed suddenly to have lost interest for she turned her head and waved at a woman coming out of a store down the street, then she turned and went inside the newspaper office. Jess found himself moving across the street toward the *Medicine Creek Weekly Record*.

Jess went into the building and a bell over the door jangled. The girl, seated at a rolltop desk, looked up as he entered, and there was something about the way she stared at him that made him feel a little uneasy inside. She arose and came over to the counter.

"Has a man named Ira Turner ever lived around here?" Jess asked.

"Why, yes," the girl said. "It's strange you should ask about him. I thought for a moment that you were Ira when you rode in. We've been expecting him."

Jess figured it was not his job to tell her Ira Turner was not coming back. He was mildly curious as to why she had mistaken him for the man. He said, "I don't think I look anything like Turner."

The girl smiled. "I see that you don't now. But from a distance there was something about you—" She hesitated, then asked eagerly, "Do you know Ira?"

He nodded. "I acquired a ranch off him which he claimed he owned up here and which I ain't even seen. Maybe you could tell me where it is?"

A queer, troubled look fell over the girl's face. He had figured that ranch for the gunman's dying dream and it irritated him that he should find himself asking

about it. If Ira Turner had owned a ranch he wouldn't have been toting guns for pay a hundred and fifty miles from home.

He said, a little brusquely, "Turner was probably jokin'. I wouldn't have asked if I hadn't been just riding by, so to speak. I ain't out nothin' on it."

The girl shook her head. "You can find your ranch twelve miles north of here. When you cross Medicine Creek you're on your range. I don't know the exact boundaries but your neighbors can tell you." She paused and when she spoke again there was despondency in her voice. "That means Ira won't be coming back. We could use him here."

The door opened and two men walked in. One of them, a tall, muscled man in his middle thirties and wearing a dark suit, held a paper in his hand. His face was flushed with anger and his eyes were on the girl, ignoring Jess.

The man said harshly, "You're carrying this too far, Sandra," and threw the newspaper on the desk. Jess caught the bold type across the front page. It read,

LEE DOOLIN SPONSORING OWN
HIRELING FOR MAYOR

Beneath that was a sub-heading: WIDE
OPEN TOWN IS DOOLIN'S AIM.

The girl jumped to her feet and Jess saw the gold flecks of anger in her hazel eyes. She said coldly, "Who's carrying

what too far, Mr. Doolin? Maybe you should take a look in your own yard before answering that. Or is it all right for you to make our home town a wild, lawless hangout for your painted women, drunkards, gamblers, and general cut-throats? You've made it that already, Mr. Doolin, and now you need a figurehead, a mayor, so you can keep it that way. Well, Sam Harvey won't be mayor if people listen to me, and I think they do."

The man who had come in with Doolin, a pompous, barrel-bellied individual, eased up to the desk. Jess figured him to be Sam Harvey, the man Doolin was running for mayor. The fat man said placatingly, "Now, Sandra, get your feathers down. This ain't no fight for a girl to mix in. There's some around here that go along with Lee's way of doing things and some as don't. When election rolls around, it'll be settled. You ain't gonna change things by callin' Lee and me names in yore paper."

Doolin nodded, some of the anger dying from his lean, handsome face. He said, "Sure, Sandra, Sam's right. This is a man's fight. You best stay out of it—unless you want to be treated like a man." He moved towards the door with Sam Harvey following him.

Jess grinned at the girl. "Politics?"

She shook her head, her eyes still on the two men moving across the street. "It's nothing to joke about, stranger. Lee

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STAR



SINGLE OR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES 10¢ and 25¢ Pkgs.

Doolin is swallowing this town a bite at a time. He's bought, stole, and shot his way to the top of the heap here. Now with the railroad coming in, he's getting set to cash in on his power. He owns both saloons and the hotel, so he'll get most of the trail herd and railroad business, and with his own man in office as mayor there'll be no controls on him. He can take the limit off his game and keep his doors open all night. If the other merchants get any protection from the drunks and outlaws, they'll pay Doolin dearly for it and he'll turn around and use that money against them. When Dad was alive, he used this paper to keep folks in line. He'd want me to do the same."

Jess was surprised at the bitterness in her voice.

He felt the stirring of anger within him at Lee Doolin.

Sandra said moodily, "If Ira Turner were here he'd cool Doolin off in a hurry."

That struck him odd. He said, "This is between the townspeople. I thought Ira was a rancher."

The girl's eyes left the window and leveled on Jess. She smiled faintly. "You don't know Ira very well, do you? Anybody's fight is Ira's fight, too. That is his trouble, I guess. I can remember when I was a kid, Ira used to take every dangerous job that came along. Claimed he was saving for a ranch and needed the money. He wasn't fooling anyone but himself. It was in Ira to hunt trouble and smash it and he couldn't change himself. He finally got his ranch, but he wouldn't stay on it. Now he's sold it to you. I guess he realized at last that he wasn't meant to settle down."

Her analysis of Ira angered him vaguely.

He said, "I best be moving. Good luck to you, m'am." He moved through the door and to his saddle horse. He wanted to see his ranch before it grew dark.

HE CAME upon the ranch just before sunset. There was a long log house flanked on two sides by towering cottonwoods. There was a big rail corral built around a small spring to provide water for the saddle stock. There was a hay barn with a tin roof and a shed for the wagon and buckboard. In front of the house Medicine Creek boiled and bounced, its clear, cold water churned white by the shallow rapids. Surrounding the buildings as far as he could see was rolling grassland. It was a picture layout. He kneeed the roan into a lope toward the ranch house.

For a week he threw himself into the work around the ranch with a passion and fervor that would have broken a lesser man. There was a harness team to buy, breeding stock to buy, hay to haul and a dozen odd repair jobs on the house and out-buildings.

He met old Nate Simms, his neighbor on the east side, and from him bought forty head of whiteface heifers. Simms was an old man, but active, and he took a keen interest in seeing Jess get started right.

They were seated on Simms's porch, smoking and relaxing after a day in the saddle, cutting out the heifers Jess had bought. They had eaten Ma Simms's roast beef and brown potatoes and with the cool evening breeze fanning down from the hills around them, and the yellow light of lamps gleaming in the windows. Jess felt a slow, easy sense of well-being and security flowing through him. He stretched and flipped away his smoke.

He said, "No man could ask for more than this."

Old Simms nodded. "We've been lucky out here. We don't have no neighbor trouble, no rustling to put up with, and the beef market's good. A man could look all his life and not beat it. Take a hundred miles north of here, they're beginning to have sheep trouble. Big herd of woolies

moved in on the cattlemen up there three-four months ago. Take a hundred fifty miles south of here, the big syndicate outfit just finished off the small ranchers. Take in town, even, a gent named Lee Doolin is giving the old settlers a lot of trouble bringing in bad women and gunslingers and squeezing the local merchants out of business. There's trouble everywhere but here."

Mention of the trouble in town sent a tingle through Jess, edging out the warmth inside him. He said uneasily, "Looks like some of the folks out here would take a hand in keepin' this gent Doolin in line. After all, you folks have to trade in that town and take your women there."

Old Simms shook his head. "Doolin don't bother us. We stay at his hotel and we get good service and our womenfolks get good treatment. He ain't wanting trouble with us out here, nor we with him. Town politics ain't got nothin' to do with the beef market."

Jess rolled another smoke. "I reckon you're right," he said. But that night when he sank down in one of Simm's big feather beds, he wasn't thinking about what a comfortable layout Simms had here. He was thinking of a girl with gold flecks in her eyes and a lean, handsome man who was slowly taking that girl's town away from her. . . .

He rode into town late the next day. There was a new harness he wanted to buy, and tools and provisions. Thoughts of the girl, Sandra, had been with him most of the day, so he headed for the newspaper office first, telling himself he could get a better buy in a couple of range bulls if he advertised for them.

He stepped up on the porch of the office and was about to pull on the door when he noticed the padlock and chain swinging from the hasp. Looking at the window, he saw the blinds were drawn. He stood there a brief moment, trying to guess what had happened, know-

ing it was connected with the trouble Doolin was causing. A savage flare of anger reddened his face. One lone girl standing up to a heller like Lee Doolin, with paid gunmen backing his play. Doolin ought to feel proud of this job. Then he wondered where Sandra was now, and the knowledge that she might be hurt chilled him. He turned away from the door.

He saw Sam Harvey, Doolin's candidate for mayor, watching him from the boardwalk. "If you got business with the paper, mister, you're out of luck. Some coyote worked over them presses with a sledge hammer." The fat man was smiling.

Cold lights arose in Jess's eyes. He took two long steps towards the fat man and buried his fist deep in the man's soft stomach. The fat man's face turned pale and he dropped to his knees, sucking for breath. Jess grabbed him by the collar and yanked him to his feet. He said quietly, "Where's the girl?"

The fat man couldn't answer. Jess waited, then said again, "Where is she? If you've harmed her I'll settle with you."

The fat man's eyes rolled whitely. He was looking at a man who would send him straight to hell without batting an eye. He said chokingly, "She's all right. She's over at old lady Kelley's house. I didn't have nothin' to do with this."

Jess shoved the man from him, and made his way down the walk to the Silver Dollar Saloon. It was the biggest saloon in town, and Doolin's pride. He shouldered through the batwings and made for the long cherry-wood bar. A big mirror behind the bar reflected the elaborate chandeliers and green-topped, ornately carved gambling tables.

Jess found a place at the bar and ordered whiskey from the barkeep. There was a heady excitement coursing through him, reflected in the reckless slant of his shoulders, the cool, studied insolence of his eyes.

He picked up his whiskey, gulped it, then spat it out. He said angrily, "Hogwash. Watered down hogwash." Men at the bar set down their drinks and stared at him.

Jess drew his gun deliberately. Just as deliberately he squeezed the trigger, twice, shattering the big plate glass mirror. The bartender's face turned white, then red. He stared at Jess unbelievably.

Jess holstered his gun. He said softly, "Tell Doolin not to fix that mirror until he fixes up Miss Sandra's printing press. Tell him Jess Oakes said that." He turned then, and stalked out the door.

He found from inquiry that the Kelley house was the two-story house behind the general store. He headed towards it.

It was Sandra, herself, who opened the door. She recognized him and smiled, but her eyes were red and swollen. Looking at her Jess thought she was beautiful. He took off his hat, awkward in her presence.

She said, "This is a surprise, Jess. I'm glad to see you again. How did you find your ranch?"

"The ranch was fine," Jess said. "Everything was fine." He studied his hat brim a moment, then added, "I heard about your trouble. That's a dirty shame what Doolin did. I aim to talk to him about that, Sandra. Hope you won't think I'm meddlin' in your affairs."

She moved to the porch step and sat down, and Jess sat beside her. Finally she said, "You're not meddling, Jess. But it's not your fight and you better stay clear of it. Besides, you can't just talk to men like Doolin, Jess. Doolin would just laugh at you and forget it. You can't deal with him like that."

Jess said slowly. "He won't forget it, and he won't laugh."

The girl stared at him, sensing the grimness in his voice. "Doolin is dangerous. Nobody ever crossed him openly around here except Ira Turner. Ira wouldn't let Doolin get by with anything."

Jess said thoughtfully, "You and me can't keep Doolin from grabbin' this town. It's goin' to take lots of others to help us. When it's all put down and looked over, there ain't one vote between us, since I ain't allowed to vote in town elections because I'm a rancher."

Sandra nodded. "The old-timers and the honest merchants will vote against Doolin's man, if they aren't scared off and browbeaten into submission. That's what Doolin is trying to do now—he's got the people afraid to talk against him. I was beginning to break through that fear with my newspaper campaign against him. But that's stopped now, at least until I get the press fixed."

Jess stood up. He said, "I'll stay in town tonight. I'll see you before I leave."

Sandra nodded and touched his arm. "Be careful, Jess."

HE WALKED off, still feeling the warm pressure of her fingers on his arm. He was pretty lucky, he figured. He had his ranch and he had a girl. Maybe she hadn't thought about him like that, but she would before this was over. He made it over to Faye's Cafe and ordered a steak at the counter.

He had noticed the groups of men standing around in front of the stores along the street, and he commented on this now, as the red-haired waitress set his plate before him.

"Sure," the girl said. "Some tough hand named Oakes just tore up Lee Doolin's Silver Dollar Saloon. This Oakes is a newcomer here, but I reckon he's all man. Have to be to buck Doolin. I'm for him and I don't care who knows it. It's about time Doolin was taken down a notch or two."

She ended her speech abruptly as two men walked in and took counter stools on both sides of Jess. They ordered coffee, and he eyed them warily, sensing trouble

in the way they had entered and flanked him so quietly.

The men sipped their coffee in silence, then one of them, a small, sallow-faced man, swiveled around to look at Jess. The man said, "You're Oakes, ain't you?"

Jess nodded, his hand dropping free of the bar. The man eyed him for a long moment. "Doolin sent us to talk to you. He don't want no trouble with you or any of the other ranchers. This is strictly not any of yore business, mister. He said tell you he'd fix the mirror and forget it. You forgot it, too, Mister Oakes."

Jess felt the old recklessness sweeping him. He grinned thinly, "How about the girl's printing press. Does he fix that?"

The sallow gunman frowned. "You know better than that."

Jess said thinly, "Tell Doolin I'll be up there in an hour or so to collect for the damage to Miss Sandra's press."

He sensed movement behind him, expecting it, and he was ready for it. He swept his left arm backward in a powerful blow and felt the edge of his wrist smash into a man's throat. There was a crash as the man fell from the stool. The sallow-faced gunman was going for his gun.

Jess made his own draw, smooth and fast, firing from hip level. The little gunman slid off the stool, a look of surprise stamped on his face. Jess leaped off the stool, whirling in time to see the other gunhawk, still on the floor where Jess had

knocked him, trying to sneak draw for his shoulder gun. Jess fired again and the gunman yelled, then coughed and lay still.

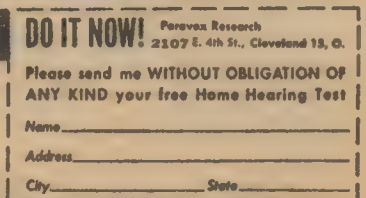
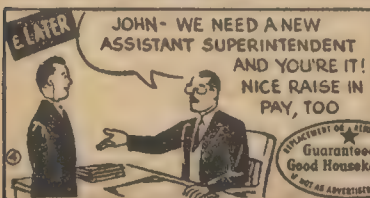
Jess looked at the waitress, who had pushed back against the wall behind the counter. She was eyeing him in terror-stricken silence. He said apologetically, "Cleaning up a town is sometimes pretty messy."

She didn't answer and Jess walked out, heading straight for the Silver Dollar Saloon. Doolin wouldn't scare and he wouldn't quit. He wasn't that kind of man, else he'd never got to be top dog around here. So there was just one way to get rid of Doolin.

He turned up the steps of the Silver Dollar, moving deliberately, knowing what he was going up against. It came to him vaguely that he didn't know too much about this trouble he had bought into. But then he thought of Sandra and that was reason enough for him. She needed his help.

Men who had heard the shooting down the street were eyeing him carefully, some following behind him at a safe distance. They knew who he was and what he was out to do. The kind of news he made spread rapidly. He shouldered past a group of men at the head of the steps and heard someone whisper, "Gunman," but lost the rest of it as he moved on.

There was a small crowd in the saloon, a few scattered games going under the



lights, a handful of men at the bar. Lee Doolin was there. Doolin, tall and lean and coldly handsome, stood at the bar with Sam Harvey, and another squat, bullet-headed man who packed two guns in open-toed holsters. Sam Harvey spotted him instantly and nudged Doolin with an elbow.

Jess moved across the floor, stopping at the bar a dozen feet from Doolin.

Lee Doolin eyed him coldly. He said, "I sent a couple of men to talk to you, Oakes. They haven't come back."

Jess laughed silently, and said, "They won't come back, Doolin. They're gone plumb to hell."

Doolin's eyes flickered, then steadied. He poured himself a drink but didn't taste it. He said softly, "You don't live in this town, Oakes. Why elbow your way into this fight?"

Jess looked over at the squat, bullet-headed gunman who had been edging away from the bar. The man froze. Jess said sourly, "I live close by, Doolin. The smell of a skunk carries a long way."

He said it loud so the whole room heard it. Doolin couldn't let it ride. The man couldn't take a deliberate insult like that and still expect to throw his weight around the town. A slow, insolent grin cracked Jess's lips. He waited.

Doolin said, "All right, Oakes, you asked for this," and even as he spoke his hand whipped to the shoulder guns beneath his long coat. But it wasn't Doolin Jess was watching. It was the squat, bullet-headed gunman. The squat gunman had moved with Doolin, his hands blurring towards his holsters. He was fast. But Jess reached for his own gun, and even before it cleared leather, he knew he was going to beat Doolin's gunman. It gave him a sense of satisfaction to know that Doolin didn't have a man on his payroll who could come close to matching his draw.

His first bullet took the gunman low

and knocked him back and the next one dropped him. Lee Doolin had his gun out now and he snapped a shot at Jess, but the man's cool nerve had broken with the flash and roar of Jess's gun and the shot went wild, ripping into the row of bottles behind the bar.

Jess side-stepped like a boxer, dropped to one knee and fired twice, each shot driving home. Lee Doolin dropped his gun and clutched at the bar for support. He looked at Jess, his eyes glazing. He muttered, "Damn it, it wasn't your fight." Then he slid down the bar front at the feet of the fat man, Sam Harvey, who stood paralyzed where he'd stood when the shooting started. His fat chin was quivering but his vocal chords wouldn't beg for the mercy that his eyes were asking. Jess looked at him disgustedly and turned away.

MEN followed him outside and ganged around him, and others came running up, their voices high with excitement, firing questions at him. Jess stood and rolled a smoke and answered the questions, the fire of battle still hot within him. Once he thought he heard a woman call his name, but the crowd was building up around him and the faces ran together in a blur of wild confusion.

A man broke through the crowd to reach Jess's side. He was a cowman, Jess could tell, and he'd come a long way, judging from the trail dust that coated the man's clothes.

The man said warmly, "I got in on the tail end of that shooting scrape. Mister, you can sure handle a peacemaker. There ain't no wage too high but what the boys up north would take you on."

Jess said puzzledly, "Up north?"

The man nodded. "Sheep moving in. I'm from Granite Valley. Them woolly herders got two of our men last week. We got a fight on our hands. We could sure use a man like you."

Jess said, "I'll think about it." He moved through the crowd and headed down the street toward the Kelley house. He didn't have to go there, though, because Sandra came to him. She stepped out of the doorway of Pop Foster's Drug Store and ran toward him.

She put her arms around him and held him tight. She said brokenly, "Jess, Jess, I didn't think you'd try it just by yourself. You could have been killed."

He looked at her in the soft evening light. She had light brown hair and her eyes were hazel. She was a good girl, and would make a wonderful wife for some man someday. He could still see that, but some deeper sense of urgency filled him now. He wondered about that as he tried to meet her steady gaze.

He said, "Sandra, things are all right here now, but those sheep-herders are killing off the ranchers up north. Once they get a toehold up there, they'll spread down here, sure as Satan. You know what will happen to my ranch and to the other ranches if that happens."

He felt her stiffen and push back from him. She said, "Jess," and there was fear and bewilderment in her voice.

He said, "I hate to go, seein' as how I'm just gettin' started out on the ranch and all, but it's either now or too late. Tell old man Simms to keep an eye on my stock, and I'll pay him for the trouble. Shouldn't be gone too long."

"Jess," Sandra said again, and there was bitterness in her voice. "Jess, what is it—why is it?" Her voice broke, then steadied. She looked at him quietly, "I'm sorry, Jess. You see, I thought you got

into this fight because you wanted to help me. But it wasn't that. You just wanted to fight, to use your gun, and you used me as an excuse. You really fooled me, Jess, but I think you fooled yourself, too. It wasn't your fault entirely."

He said unconvincingly, "That ain't so, Sandra. I'm comin' back. I got a ranch here and everything. Sure, I'm comin' back."

She shook her head. "Jess, remember when you rode into town? Remember I thought you were Ira Turner, and I came running out of the office?" She watched his face closely and her eyes grew bright with unshed tears. "Jess—be careful up there." She whirled away and ran from him.

He watched her and a cold chill fanned him. He turned back towards the saloon. The excitement had drained out of the night.

The wide streets were quiet again. A lone horse stood at the hitching rail in front of the saloon. It belonged to the cowman from up north.

Jess looked at the horse and then turned and looked toward the Kelley house, barely visible in the moonlight. "Remember I thought you were Ira?" she had said. And, "Be careful up there." What was she thinking? Thinking perhaps that a month or two from now she'd come running out of the office again to meet a rider coming in from the north. *To meet a rider that looked like Jess Oakes—but wasn't?*

Again that chill swept his back and he felt the hackles on his neck rise. He shrugged deeper into his jacket, and walked toward the saloon.

WHEN THE GUNS CALL—RIDE!

An Action-Packed Frontier Saga

By

FRANK BONHAM

JUNE ISSUE

ON SALE MAY 11th

LAW OF THE NIGHT

**By
JOE
ARCHIBALD**

Bob saw McElvy reach for his gun as DeSain went back against the bar. . . .



THERE was only one man in Reliance who knew that Miles Raban, foreman of the Jingle-bob ranch, had ever been anything but a mild and peaceable man. He was Sam Doan, an old swamper at the Brass Bucket who had lived a long time, and he was mighty proud to be Raban's friend. His only regret was that he could not tell everybody for miles around just how big a man

Miles Raban had been—and still was.

Raban had come into town early this morning to see about a shipment of shingles ordered at the lumber yard by his boss, Ben Starke. He'd met old Sam Doan in the Star Restaurant when he went in to have a cup of coffee. Now the two men stood out on the walk and looked at the big fading black letters strung along a false front across the street. SOLON G.

BARDETTE, REAL ESTATE, LOANS, INSURANCE.

"Only one man I know can stop him," Sam Doan observed. "If he would."

"That's over and done with," Raban said quietly, but firmly.

"All right," the swamper said. "But this is your town and you've got friends in it, and for miles around."

Miles Raban felt the sting of the old man's words but he had no intention of letting them break a promise he had made to himself. Two years ago he'd ridden into Reliance and he'd hardly slipped out of his saddle when the little bow-legged man with the snow-white hair and tangled mustache had sidled up to him. "Say, if it ain't Bob Yule!" Doan had said.

"Forget that name, Sam," he'd said. "I'm Miles Raban."

"You sure are," the swamper had said. "I've got a bad memory." And then he'd told Raban about Bardette and that the man had most of the county in his pocket. "Don't ever dare say there's fakery in his dealings or that he was behind the persecution of certain hombres who held acreage he wanted. It won't be healthy for a timid man to say he knows anythin' about some killin's that took place or that he charges exorbitant interest on the money he lends out. Just fall in with the rest of the sheep, friend, an' say ba-a-a!"

Sam Doan never let up on the Jingle-bob foreman. He kept insinuating that Miles Raban was the only man he knew with a chance to put an end to Bardette's rough-shod rule, and chase the curly wolves who handled his violence.

Miles Raban was crowding forty but he'd never allowed the suet to pile up on him, and he'd never been much for reading so his eyes were as sharp as they'd ever been. When he'd finished with a certain gun job for a cattlemen's association up in Montana he'd felt the urge to taper off and get the powdersmoke out of his nose. He had a sister down here, married

to a puncher who'd acquired a two-bit spread called the Box L. Bardette held a big mortgage on the place and was beginning to squeeze.

"If that jasper's two gunslingers knew who you really was, they'd light a shuck an' fast, Miles," the swamper said. "You could take 'em both with your coat pulled up over your head."

"Sam," the Jingle-bob foreman said shortly, "I never could throw lead at a man I hadn't cause to hate. Unless it's to defend myself I never touch a six-gun. They're leaving me alone and they haven't hit at Ben Starke." He walked away from Sam Doan, then stopped when he saw a horseman coming into town. The man's seat in the saddle, the clothes he wore, and the slab-sided bronc he rode labeled him immediately.

"Looks like that nester, Ed Hardin," the swamper called to Raban.

They watched the man get off his horse in front of Bardette's and knew there was temper in him. The sound of his heavy boots as he climbed the wooden stairs carried far, and the pound of his fist against a door brought a low curse from Old Sam's lips. Miles Raban felt the old tension when three men came out of the lobby of the hotel half a block from Bardette's office and hurried down the steps.

"Vanteen and DeSain," the swamper said. "You never see 'em too far away from their boss. Wonder who the other hombre is?"

The Bardette trio hurried along the walk and swung through a doorway and up the steps. Angry voices blended and then the nester came tumbling out to the walk. Raban crossed the street telling the swamper to stay where he was.

The nester's mouth was bleeding when he struggled painfully to his feet. He looked up at Raban pleadingly and said, "Bardette sold me land that's no good. He give me the idea I could tap that creek belonging to the Circle Diamond for the

water I had to have. But he knew all the time—"

Raban said, "You just made a fool play, nester," and gently shoved the man toward the tie-rail. "Better get out of town an' cool off."

"You give good advice," a voice said, and the foreman turned and looked into Sid Vanteen's dark face. It wore a toothy and arrogant smile that did not reach as far as his eyes. The old temptation stirred deep inside Raban and he had to give it a fight. Mort DeSain, standing just behind Vanteen, nodded approvingly.

"It'd be mighty bad, Sid," DeSain said, "if all the jiggers around here were as sensible as Raban. We'd be out of a job."

"Maybe it's his age," Vanteen laughed.

Miles Raban felt the storm riding through him and he turned quickly and watched the nester ride slowly out of Reliance.

HE CROSSED the street and got into the saddle of his chestnut horse and decided to stop in at the Box L on his way back to Starke's. The anger was completely drained out of him when he cut through wooded bottoms seven miles northwest of Reliance and came out upon Will Goodenough's small set of ranch buildings. He made out a blob of blue near the struggling flower garden and stopped his horse and feasted his eyes on it. He'd bought that dress for little Anne himself.

The little girl came running when Raban rode into the yard and let out a whoop he used for her alone. He reached down and lifted her to the saddle and let her hold the chestnut's reins as far as the corral. He put his head down and caressed the light golden hair with his chin and asked her who it was that loved her the best in the whole world.

"You, Uncle Miles," the child said.

"And don't ever forget it," the foreman told her as he helped her down and plan-

ted her little feet on the ground. His sister came out of a henhouse with a basket of eggs and waved to him, and the lack of spirit in the gesture told him that she was worried. Her eyes confirmed his misgivings when she came up to him.

"Bardette puttin' on the pressure, Vera?" Raban asked.

"It's not just that, Miles. I'm terribly worried about Anne. She doesn't want to eat and keeps having those pains in her side."

"Your imagination can run away with you," Raban said. "Just some tuning up is all she needs. I'll get some of that beef an' wine tonic from Doc Felch next time I'm in town." He smiled down at Anne and saw for the first time that a lot of the color in her cheeks was missing. And she hadn't bothered to ask him if he'd brought her a peppermint stick. That was a bad sign.

"Sometimes I hate this country, Miles," his sister said. "You're so far away from everything when you need something in a hurry. We have no real doctors. They said if the Ashburn boy could have had the right chance he wouldn't have died."

Miles Raban put his arm around Vera Goodenough and told her to forget things like that. "Folks like us would pine away and die in the city."

"I guess you're right, Miles," the woman said and went on towards the house.

Miles picked little Anne up and planted a kiss on her cheek and when he got into the saddle it was in his mind that the child was running a slight fever. Three miles from Ben Starke's big Jingle-bob home ranch he shrugged his fears aside and suddenly realized that a man's pride can take a bad beating when he decides to live in peace. *Old, am I? It takes years, you young gun-squirts, to become experts at any trade.*

Miles Raban eyed the horse hitched to the rail of Ben Starke's porch as he rode

in through the gate. When he came away from turning his horse loose he saw a tall man in a blue store suit and wearing a wide-brimmed beaver hat come out of the ranch house with the boss. The talk he was making was loud and impatient and when he got back into the saddle he angrily wheeled his bronc away and brought a snort of protest out of its nose. Raban figured that it was none of his business and continued on to the grub shack.

He was eating his noon meal with the four punchers who hadn't ridden out to the range that day when Ben Starke came in and sat down next to him. The rancher's face was troubled.

"That was Win Conatser who just rode out, Miles," Starke said. "Took over the JT about six months ago, after his brother died. Bardette sent for him a couple of days ago and showed him a note for five thousand dollars that his brother was supposed to have signed. Win claims it was drawn up mighty legal but he's sure it was a forgery. But he can't prove it."

"I wonder how long Bardette's goin' to get away with all this," a horse wrangler snapped. "Sooner or later he's goin' to hit right at us, Ben."

"Conatser wants to organize a bunch of vigilantes," Starke said. "Maybe if I hadn't been through a cattle war I'd go along with him, but when a man gets

to be my age, he has seen his share of killing. It'll give the wild bunch a chance to move in and who could tell who was a vigilante an' who wasn't when hombres cover their faces with cloth."

"Bardette controls the law," the horse wrangler said. "What other way can you fight the man, Ben? Nobody knows how many men he has on his payroll. They could be planted on half a dozen ranches. The cattle we've lost—"

Starke said, "Only way to beat him without spilling a lot of good blood is to hire hombres his gunmen can't bluff. While he holds a pair of aces like Vanteen and DeSain there won't be many that'll want to tangle with him."

"I saw 'em in Reliance this morning, Ben," Miles Raban said. "There was one other man with 'em. A saddle-faced jigger without a gun."

"That's a slick operator named McElvy," Starke said. "He gets the orders from Bardette an' carries 'em through. Well, as long as Bardette keeps his hooks off my holdings, I'm sitting tight." He grinned ruefully at his foreman. "We're getting old, Miles, but we're still too young to die."

Raban said, "Sometimes living with yourself comes mighty hard, Ben," and got up from his chair. "Figure I'll ride out an' see how the wild hay crop looks. We'd better cut it mighty soon before we get too much rain all at once."



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He went into the bunkhouse to get a sack of cigarette tobacco and the horse wrangler followed him in. He was a young man even for a rough string and his name was Mattoon.

"Looks like there ain't many real men left in this part of the country, Raban," the wrangler said sourly. "I found out you can be mistaken about a man even though he wears his gun a certain way."

"I'll let that pass, kid," Miles Raban said quietly. "For now, anyway. You stick to busting bronses an' you'll live to be a grandpa." He went out and crossed to the corral and roped his horse. A half hour later, out in the hills, he got out of the saddle and watched and listened for several moments. Off to the left about sixty yards away there was a dead tree with a knot-hole in its trunk about the size of a man's fist.

Miles Raban suddenly drew his Colt and fired twice, and then walked slowly over to the tree. He felt a light sweat come out on him for it was in his mind that he had not been as sharp as of yore. Yet when he examined the tree's dead trunk he found that both bullets had hit that knothole and had gone out through the rotting wood on the other side. He stood there, a small smile on his face, and squared his shoulders. Another day he'd bring his second six-gun and give himself another test.

HE CAME to the meadows and passed judgment on the hay, crossed over them and rode up a steep slope to a wall of timber. Coming out into the sun's glare once more on a long flat bench he met six of Ben Starke's punchers. A loose-jointed man clipped a greeting and spat at the hard ground. "Raban," he said, "We haven't found hide nor hair of those stray horses. We've been everywhere we figured a bronc would go. Stopped in at our old line cabin near the basin an' saw that some

gents had recently cooked a meal. Any of our ranahans smoke little twisted black cigars?"

"Might mean something," Raban said, "and might not. Let's get a rough count of the stock down in the bottoms on our way back."

The foreman talked briefly with Ben Starke after supper that night and when he left the ranch house he thought of little Anne and decided to go into Reliance and talk to Doc Felch.

The town was filling fast when he walked up the flight of rickety steps to Doc Felch's office. Doc was a fat, pleasant man with thinning hair who did the best he could for his patients with the little medical knowledge he possessed. Raban opened the door and stepped inside and saw that Doc already had a visitor.

"Sorry, Doc," Raban said. "I'll come back later."

"Ain't a patient, Miles," Doc Felch said. "Come on in."

Raban suddenly recognized the young puncher who was sitting near Doc's old desk looking through one of Doc's old dog-eared medical books. His name was Tom Cory and he'd been working out at the JT for about six months. He had a quiet, scholarly face and his range garb just did not seem to fit him.

"Yep," Doc said. "Tom figures he'll be a real doctor some day, Miles. Wish I had his hands. Just made t' hold a scalpel."

"They'll need a doctor out here some day," Cory said. "No offense, Doc. I mean a surgeon. If I can ever pile up enough savin's to get started in that college—"

Raban looked at Cory's hands and at once knew they had been made to save and not to kill. "You keep on workin' toward that, kid," he said. "Don't ever give up." He spoke to Doc about Anne and Felch said, "Tell her ma to see if there's tension in her side, Miles. An' if

she gits nausea with the pain. Meanwhile I'll give you some medicine to take out there."

"Well, I'd better get going," Cory grinned. "Have to meet somebody."

"She's sure a pretty girl," Doc laughed. "I've knowed Hester for a long time. In fact I brought her into the world."

Raban talked with Doc Felch for another half hour and then paid for the medicine and took his leave. There was a nagging unease within him when he walked to the Brass Bucket to get himself a drink. He was taking it slowly when he heard the sounds of trouble a short distance down the street. He followed several other men out of the saloon and he lost a step when he saw the man picking himself out of the dust in front of the saddler's shop. Standing at the edge of the walk was Sid Vanteen. The gunman's voice was grimly clear.

"When you git to be a man, kid, then you can go courting!" Vanteen sneered. "I don't want to see no more rabbit tracks goin' to or from a certain lady's house. I have an interest there."

Tom Cory got to his feet and wiped blood from his mouth. He wore no gun. He bent down and picked up his hat and looked at Vanteen. "I think it's the lady's right to decide that," he said, and walked across the street to the tie-rack.

Miles Raban felt the past beginning to close in around him and he knew that his feelings were plain in his eyes when they clashed with Vanteen's. The gunman said sharply, "What about it, Raban?"

The Jingle-bob ramrod held himself steady. He said, wrapping his words up in a tolerant smile, "Sid, a six-gun can give a man a lot of things he wants, except a good woman. You can't force that!"

Vanteen said, "I'm going to have you figured out pretty soon, Raban," and leaned against a post to spin a cigarette.

When he was about to get back into the saddle, Raban smelled the strongest pipe he'd ever known and heard Old Sam Doan's voice. "Ain't much Bardette an' his crowd don't have a claim on, Miles. It's a wonder we're allowed to keep our souls."

"If you want to hold onto yours, Sam," Raban snapped, "keep your tongue hobbled." He left the reins loose when he saw Solon Bardette coming along the planked walk and felt the pressure of the man's personality. He wore a heavy mustache and goatee and was dressed in rich black broadcloth, white shirt and beautifully polished Justin boots. He wore his hair long at the nape of his neck and it was as black as coal.

Bardette suddenly came over to the tie-rail and said, "Raban, I've been told Starke has been talkin' with Conatser. Tell your boss I want to see him within the next couple of days."

"Right," Raban said dryly, and swung his horse out into the street. It was apparent now that the devil had found the excuse to intimidate Ben Starke and it was inevitable that the Jingle-bob would suffer penalties, yet Raban was telling himself as he rode out of Reliance that his loyalty to Starke had its limits and that he would keep away from the business of killing.

He met Will Goodenough three miles from town and the man was riding hard. "It's Anne," the rancher yelled as he passed Raban. "She's bad, Miles."

He caught up with Goodenough and rode back into town with him. "Took her sudden, Miles," the rancher flung over at him. "You get Doc's bronc an' I'll get him. We can't lose any time."

RABAN had a dun horse saddled and ready at the walk in front of Phelps's office almost before Goodenough hustled the doctor down the steps of the frame building. Doc couldn't stay on

a bronc that was too fast and so it was fairly late when the trio rode into the Box L yard. Raban saw his sister framed in the doorway of the small house and he knew that the next few hours were going to be mighty dark.

He sat in the kitchen with Will and waited for nearly a half hour. Then Doc Felch came out in his shirtsleeves and he looked at the two men and shook his head.

"Done all I could, Will," he said and dropped into a chair. "I'm too far behind the times. Looks like you'd better get somethin' strong to drink if you have it around, friend."

"Come right out with it, Doc!" Miles said, scarcely breathing.

"Same symptoms as the Ashburn boy, Will," Doc said fearily. "In the cities they're cuttin' out them things that kill. Vermiform appendices that go bad. Only a few surgeons can do it. We couldn't get one here in time."

"You mean there's nothing you can do?" Goodenough yelled at the doctor. "Then why do they call you a doctor?"

"Will, I wonder myself sometimes," Doc Phelps said. "Folks out here have to wait a long time before modern things reach 'em. Like railroads, telegraph, and surgeons."

Will Goodenough's wife came into the kitchen and she was very white and frightened. She would have fallen if Miles hadn't got up quickly and steadied her. "Doctor, go in, please. She's closed her eyes and doesn't seem to have any more pain. She—"

Miles Raban rode out of the Box L an hour later with a terrible ache in his throat and a chunk of stone where his heart should have been. He kept on riding, having little recollection of where he was. It was the emptiest night he'd ever known and the stars above seemed dull and covered with rust. It was nearly dawn when he finally fell into his bunk

at the Jingle-bob and he made a decision just as he dropped into a deep sleep.

LATE in the afternoon he told Ben Starke he would finish out the month and then he'd be riding.

"You can't run away from anythin', Miles," Ben said gently. "Don't you figure the little girl might want you to stay around close?"

"She's taken, Ben," Miles said bitterly. "Skunks like Vanteen stay on. Where's the justice in that?" He looked down at the floor for a moment, then quickly lifted his head. "I almost forgot. Bardette sent word for you to come to his office."

"I see," Ben Starke said. "Looks like I'll need you more'n ever, Miles. Think it over, will you?"

Miles Raban thought it over as he rode the range with Starke's punchers and completed the work that was necessary before the fall roundup really got under way. Ben Starke had talked with Bardette and he'd had his orders to keep out of any trouble that might head Conatser's way unless he wanted a big bunch of it himself.

"I've got a hunch he'll put his cards right on the table when he figures there's no chance of his losing, Miles," Starke said when he'd arrived back from town. "A wolf pack goes to pieces when you gun down the leaders."

Raban had remained noncommittal. His own personal loss still transcended all those that other men might suffer and he would be far away from the valley when the showdown came. Three days before he was to get his last pay from Starke he went into Reliance to buy some things he'd need for a long ride south, and it was just at dusk when he walked into the Star Restaurant to get a cup of coffee. He stepped inside the door and then stepped back and put his back to the jamb. He saw Tom Cory sitting at a table in the far corner and Sid Vanteen

stood over him. Vanteen suddenly reached down and pulled the young puncher to his feet and slammed him across the face with the back of his hand.

"This'll be the last time I'll warn you, kid!" the gunman said, and he hit young Cory again and knocked him down. The table crashed over with the puncher and a catsup bottle rolled toward Cory's fingers.

Miles Raban drove forward just as the puncher's long fingers closed over the neck of the bottle for he had anticipated the kid's move, and had seen the red anger in Cory's eyes. Sid Vanteen did not reach for his gun. He brought his heel down on Cory's hand with terrific force and the crunching sound it made turned Raban's stomach before he could hit Sid with his shoulder and rock him off balance.

Vanteen hit the wall and came off it and his fingers were curled around the handle of his Colt when Raban said quickly, "I haven't a gun on me, Sid. It should be easy!"

The gunman's lips slipped back down over his teeth and the deadly consistency slowly faded from his eyes.

"Raban, I had you tagged wrong," Vanteen said. "You keep out of my way from now on."

Miles Raban looked down at Tom Cory. The puncher had struggled to a sitting position and he stared at the hand he

held in front of his eyes. Fear that did not have its source in Vanteen was on his face. Cold sweat trickled down his face and mixed with his blood. He looked up at Raban and numbly shook his head. "It hasn't any feelin' at all. Something's broken, Miles."

"Come on," Raban said, "I'll get you to Doc Felch."

Two hours later Miles Raban was on his way to the Jingle-bob and hearing those words that the doctor had spoken just as he'd left the tie-rack. "*He'll have t' see a smarter man than me about that hand, Miles. I'd swear he won't git much use out of it again.*"

Raban kept thinking of little Anne Goodenough and how she'd looked just after she'd died, and he could smell the flowers that had been piled over her little grave and hear the thud of dirt against a wooden box. He asked himself how many men like Tom Cory in this part of the country had the urge to learn the way to prolong life and guessed that Tom had been about the only one. He saw more graves and more grief in the days to come and now he knew it would not matter if old Sam Doan strode through Reliance tonight and spread the word that Bob Yule was really the foreman at the Jingle-bob.

Miles Raban knew now what he had to do. He had the cause. He calmly considered all the angles, not forgetting the



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one that had to do with the reflexes of a man who was nearing his fortieth year. They could not quite match those of younger men at the tag end of a day, and so he'd make the play.

He was Bob Yule when he washed and fed himself the next morning. He gave the Jingle-bob punchers their orders and delegated authority to a tall and lean man named Rick Norden.

"There's things I have to do before I leave this spread, Rick," the foreman said. "You might as well start taking over now."

He was sitting at the general utility table in the bunkhouse cleaning his guns when Ben Starke entered. The Jingle-bob owner's pipe nerly fell out of his mouth when he looked at the gunbelts hanging from the back of a chair.

"You declare war on somebody, Miles?" Starke asked, then sat down and looked at his ramrod slightly askance. "I never saw a two-gun man. Only heard there was such things. It's been in the back of my mind that you never was what you seemed t' be."

"I've got some business in town, Ben," the foreman said. "I don't want anybody trailin' me in, is that plain? If things happen to go wrong you'd be diggin' your own grave. You may have heard about a man named Bob Yule."

"Yule?" Ben Starke came to his feet. "The salty devil who broke up a bunch of range wolves single-handed up by Talpais that time? The jigger who gunned down Walt Kilgore an'—"

"Ben, I figure Bardette wouldn't like it much if he knew you hired Bob Yule for your ramrod."

Starke's pipe fell from his teeth this time. He shook his head with utter disbelief and rose out of his chair.

Bob Yule wiped the handle of a six-gun with tender care and placed it on the table. Then he got up and reached for the gunbelts, buckled them around him,

and tied the holsters down. Then he dropped the Colts into place and grinned at Ben Starke. "The wolf pack won't be howlin' too loud around noon-time," he said. "They like it late and dark."

"Miles!" Starke said breathlessly. "You're out of your mind. You can't go alone!"

"You're talkin' to Bob Yule," the foreman said. "I never worked no other way." He reached for the makings and built up a smoke and Ben Starke watched his long strong fingers and marvelled at their steadiness. His own hands and legs were full of tremors.

"Have my pay ready tomorrow just the same, Ben," Bob Yule said, and walked out of the bunkhouse and toward the corral.

YULE walked into the Brass Bucket a half hour before noon and stood just inside the door for a moment to appraise the five men pressed against the bar. Old Sam Doan was busily polishing the mirror behind the bar and he suddenly dropped the rag when he saw the reflection of the two-gun man.

"Raban," the barkeep called out. "What in Tophet has come over you?"

"I'm a little tired of gettin' shoved around by tin-horns, Buck," Bob Yule said quietly. "Tinhorns like DeSain an' Sid Vanteen. That crook Bardette hires guts, havin' none himself. I'll take bourbon, Buck."

A little man wearing bull-hide chaps and a calfskin vest paid for his drink and meandered out. Old Sam Doan began polishing the mirror again and once he looked toward Bob Yule and grinned.

"You've gone loco, Miles," the barkeep said, his voice mostly dried up when it came out.

Yule put his glass down and moved toward the back of the big room and eased himself into a chair. Three more cus-

tomers left the Brass Bucket. An uncomfortable quiet fell, broken only by the buzz of a big horse-fly trying to slam its way through a window pane.

Three men walked slowly into the Brass Bucket. They were Mort DeSain, the saddle-faced McElvy, and a slat of a man Yule could not immediately identify. He got to his feet and grinned at them when they had him lined up. DeSain drew apart and angled toward the bar, the purpose in his eyes plain.

"You didn't bring Sid?" Yule mocked.

"Raban, you won't open your big mouth ever again!" DeSain snapped, and slapped his hand against the butt of his sixgun.

Bob Yule knew he had DeSain beaten before he drew and fired, and he also knew that McElvy was not reaching for a cigar inside his coat even as DeSain went back against the bar from the shock of the bullet. Yule pitched slightly toward the right, drawing his left-hand gun, and his cross-fire tore into McElvy and killed him in his tracks. The third man, bent low, ran out of the Brass Bucket, and Yule stood there, his Colts still in his hands, grinning at the bullet hole in the floor two feet in front of him. That was as far as McElvy had reached out.

The barkeep's head came up into view. He looked at the man he'd known as Miles Raban and then at the dead men on the floor. His lips moved but he could not speak.

"I'm going after Sid Vanteen," Yule said. "If he comes in here before I run into him tell him a man named Bob Yule craves to meet him. Ben Starke's ramrod."

The word spread swiftly and ten minutes later as he walked past the saddler's shop, every sense alert, a significant hush had fallen over Reliance. Three punchers in front of the hardware store nodded pleasantly and their eyes wished him luck and promised him support if he needed it. He saw a small group of men in the

shade of a big cottonwood that stood in front of the express office and he crossed the street toward them, putting his back to the two big windows of Bardette's office. A pressure between his angel-bones began to ache when he came into the shade, and then he saw the oldster leaning against the bole of the cottonwood, a Winch held in position for a quick shot. A quiet little puncher grinned. "We're backin' you to the limit, mister. Good hunting!"

"Vanteen has all his stuff at the hotel," the oldster with the rifle said. "He'll be there sooner or later."

Bob Yule said, "Much obliged," and went past them to the walk, and quickly went into a small areaway that would take him around in back of the Reliance Hotel. He made his way through a warren for nearly a block and then saw the old wooden ladder leaning against the eaves of a low slanting roof. He climbed up and made his way to the top and found himself crouched down on the flat roof of the feed store that was built flush against the side of the hotel. A false front hid him from the view of the men in the street. He moved cautiously towards an opened window and looked through it and down the full length of a corridor.

There were scattered voices out there in the street as he lifted the window higher and wormed his way through it. A door suddenly opened half way down the corridor as he straightened and bit some loose skin off a bruised knuckle. Sid Vanteen came out and started walking as quietly as a cat towards the stairway at the far side of the building.

"You're goin' the wrong way, Sid!" Yule called out, his words echoing through the corridor, and the gunman stopped suddenly and froze for a long moment. Slowly he came wheeling around and Yule watched his right hand and not his eyes. *He's faster than DeSain*, he told himself, no jumpiness in him; and then the hand he

watched struck swiftly and he drew and fired with all the speed he'd ever had. He knew that he was not the dead one because of the roar of guns pounding in his ears. He'd always heard that a man can't hear the sound of the gun that kills him. But he'd felt the strike of lead and had been off balance when he fired the second one at Sid.

He moved slowly toward Vanteen who was crumpled against the wall, his head down. The gunman slowly lifted his chin off his chest and looked up at Yule with glazing eyes. He suddenly became a heap of loose bones draped in cloth and Bob Yule knew he was dead.

A dozen men had three others backed up against the front of the hardware store. Yule saw that three men were down, one on the board walk and two out in the middle of the street, and he was certain that two of them would never get up again. He grinned wide when he saw the little cattleman with the white hair lead five men toward the false front housing Bardette's enterprises, his Winch cradled in his arm.

Old Sam Doan was the first to get in step with him. "You're hit, Bob," he said.

"Not near as bad as Sid," Yule said. "Bardette up there?"

"Reckon. Nobody's given him a chance to cut loose," the swamper said. "I'm eating words I said to you, friend."

"Give me a hand an' shut up," Yule said. "Now I'm feelin' my age."

They moved in and around him, men who had been waiting many months for his kind of talent. They followed him up the flight of steps to Bardette's big office. "Somebody go and get Doc Felch," a man said.

Solon Bardette was slumped down in his big chair, all the arrogance his gunmen had preserved within him sadly missing. He looked deflated in size and a growing fear squeezed all the blood out of his face. The sweat came out on him

when he saw the man wearing two guns.

"Yule is the name," the foreman of the Jingle-bob said. "Somebody slide me a chair. Sid got a little chunk of me. That gunnie seemed puzzled about my killin' him. I want to answer the question."

"Sid crippled Tom Cory. Tom was going to study to be a real modern doctor—a surgeon. This country needs men who want to save and not kill. Sid, when he broke Cory's hand, killed a lot of folks not yet born."

Doc Felch came in with his black bag and grinned at Yule. He said, "One thing I can do is patch up bullet holes."

The man who come to Reliance as Miles Raban looked hard at Bardette. "Wouldn't be any satisfaction in killin' a bullfrog like Bardette," he said. "He's leavin' Reliance as soon as he opens his safe an' gets rid of all the crooked papers that claims he owns property and has money comin' to him. He'll take his crooked sheriff with him an' if he ever dares set foot inside this county again he'll be tarred an' feathered an' dragged behind a bronc until there won't be enough left of him t' bait a coyote trap. You savvy that, Bardette?"

There were sounds of many hoofs out in the street and the dust they kicked up boiled in through the open window. Old Sam Doan looked out and said, "The Jingle-bob and JT outfits."

Bob Yule watched Bardette take the fear and insecurity in the hearts of many people out of the safe and tear them up.

This was going to be a mighty happy and peaceful county and a man would be a fool to run away from it. He guessed that little Anne would think so too. She would expect him to stay on and build towards the day when Death couldn't just walk in to any house and take whatever he pleased. When the litter of today's violence was cleared away he guessed he'd go to the sheriff's office and pick up a star.

HELL - AND - HURRY MAN

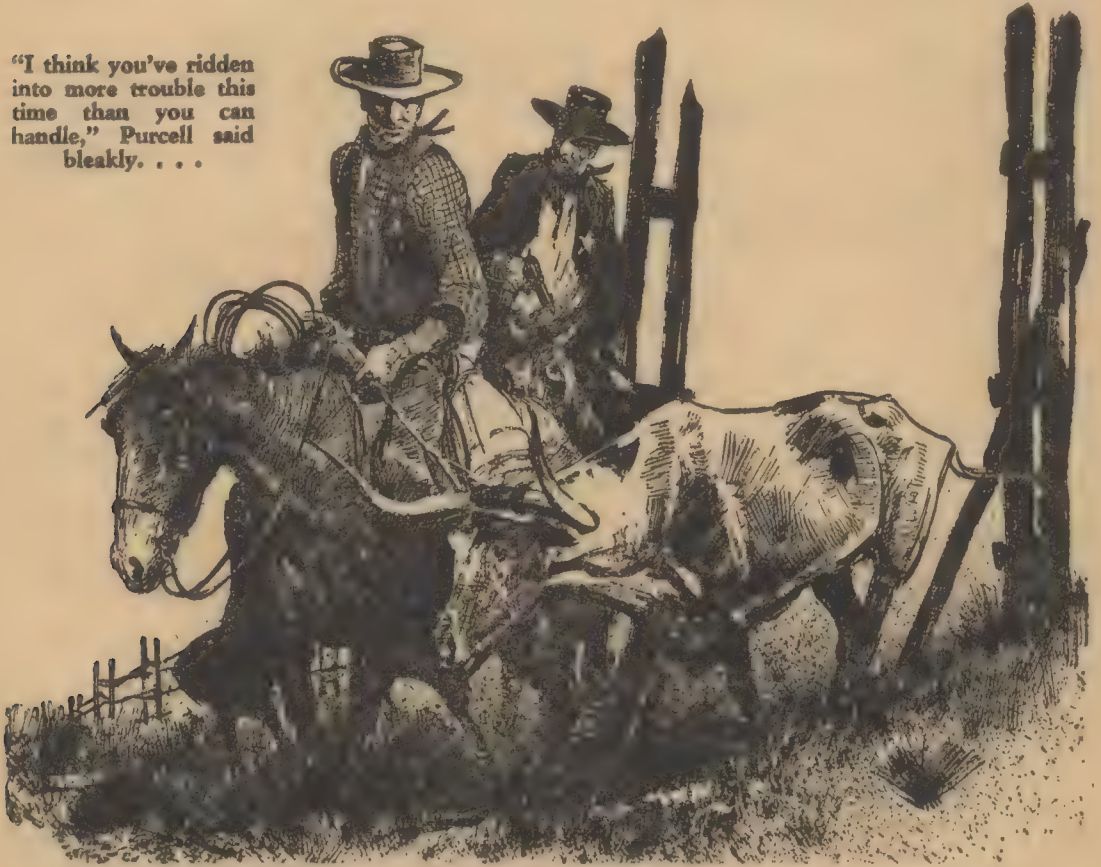
"Some gents make mistakes, Marshal — others pay for 'em. Me, I'll pay for yours in hell — if you can shoot fast enough to collect!"

EARLY the second day of the cow hunt, Adam Purcell spooked the longhorn steer he had been trailing out of a thicket on the bottomland of Bonita creek. He had heard the *ladino's* wide horns clacking against mesquite and manzanita, and had cut a wide circle to

keep the animal from escaping deeper into the trackless tangle of brush.

He was a tall, flat-shouldered man, and he approached the creek bottom thicket guardedly, as a brush-popper had to. A two-day beard blackened his jaw, and his hands were rope-burned and brush-

"I think you've ridden into more trouble this time than you can handle," Purcell said bleakly. . . .



By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

scarred. This was a tough country on man and horse; it was a poor man's range, with brush growing so thick that a snake would have to climb to see his way out.

"But there's money in it," Ben Hud-dith had said. "If a man can keep from bein' killed by outlaws hidin' out around here, or getting his neck busted by a tree limb, he can chouse out enough wild steers to make himself a stake."

Adam Purcell rode low in his saddle, and allowed his grulla to pick its own way through the interlaced tangle of buck-brush and scrub trees. He heard the steer suddenly spook a few yards ahead and begin its wild rush through the thicket. The direction was what Purcell wanted—towards the narrow county road where he would have a chance to shape his loop and make his throw.

The grulla smashed its way through the thicket behind the longhorn steer, and Purcell bent low to escape the vicious slashing of limbs. He hit the clearing a dozen feet behind the running steer, shaped his loop, and made his throw. Purcell left the saddle as the grulla sat back on his haunches, and his weight helped crash the steer down to the hard road bed. Not until he had finished hog-tying the animal did he see the rider on the road behind him.

"That's what I call mighty fast work, friend," the man said. He was small and blocky, tight-mouthed and hard-jawed, and the corner of a badge glinted under the front of his coat. He hipped around in his saddle, standing in one stirrup, and regarded Purcell with a cool gray stare. "A top hand rodeo rider couldn't have handled that steer any faster," he remarked.

Adam Purcell got slowly to his feet. Recognition struck him with a feeling of bitter shock. *After three years Charley Fall would have to find me now!* It took an effort to hold that thought out of his eyes. He fingered tobacco and papers out

of his pocket, and began putting a cigarette together. He wondered if there was as much strain in the tone of his voice as he imagined.

"When you're hunting *ladinos* in this brush you don't have much time to waste."

The man in the saddle smiled thinly. "Man or steer, that same rule goes," he commented. He chewed the end off of a cigar, lit it. "I heard this *brasada* is full of outlaws."

Purcell nudged the steer's slab side. "There's a lot more like this one if you can chouse them out."

"I'm talkin' about men."

Purcell raised his eyes to the man in the saddle. "I wouldn't know about that," he said carefully. "Lawman, are you?"

"Charley Fall. Deputy U. S. Marshal."

Adam Purcell moved his shoulders. "You follow this road a few more miles, and you'll come to Hazardville. You might ask around in town if you're hunting anyone in particular."

Charley Fall shifted his weight in the saddle. "Figured I would if I can't get a line on my man without going on to town." His voice was slow and dry, a flat, friendless voice. "I don't have much to go on. I only saw the man I'm after once, three years ago, and then I didn't pay much attention to him. He was a rodeo rider at the time, and a good one. He traveled the circuits under the name of the Tonto Kid."

"A flashy name," Adam Purcell observed.

The lawman leaned forward in his saddle. "A flashy man, too," he said softly. "Bustin' a rodeo steer or throwing a gun, the Tonto Kid was flashy. That's why I'm hunting him, because he was too handy with his gun three years ago." His smile dried out, and the corners of his mouth tightened. "He looked a lot like you, as I remember him."

Purcell dropped his cigarette, and ground it out under his heel. "My name,"

he said laconically, "is Adam Purcell."

Charley Fall bent his head, but his eyes remained grimly on Purcell's face. "Adam Purcell might also be the Kid's real name." His voice was slow, it was almost gentle. "You're bigger than the Kid, as I remember him from the one time I saw him. But three years would put weight on him, and he'd be about your size now, I figure."

Anger tightened the muscles of Adam Purcell's stomach, and he drew a long breath against it. "You're talking like a damn fool, Fall."

"Maybe," the man answered. "And maybe that's why I always get my man once I start after him. Folks up at Dodge would remember the Tonto Kid after that shooting scrape he got into. That's where you are going, Purcell—up to Dodge to see if anyone recognizes you."

Purcell's eyes hardened, and he shook his head.

Charley Fall said quietly, "My gun says you're coming with me, Purcell."

"Your gun," Adam Purcell said bleakly, "is telling you wrong."

He turned, and bent to the hog-tied steer. It was his custom, whenever possible, to neck a *ladino* to a less wild steer in order to get the captured animal back to the ranch. But there was no time for that now. He took out his pocket knife, opened the blade, and lifted one of the forelegs. He made a slit between the knee

and ankle, and cut a small tendon. After that, he pulled off the piggin' strings, straightened, and swung into saddle. With the tendon cut, the longhorn could walk but never again run.

PURCELL looked across at Charley Fall, and the lawman had pulled his gun. Purcell smiled thinly. "You come too close, and I'll make you eat that gun, Fall. Use it and you'll never ride out of here alive. Like you said—this brush is full of outlaws."

He watched the look of baffled anger that flared in the lawman's eyes. He laughed bitterly. "A gun is no good unless you're willing to use it. Feel like putting a bullet in my back, Fall? That's the only target I'm going to give you."

He swung away, leading the roped steer down the road. Charley Fall came spurring up behind him.

"I don't know whether you're honest, crooked, or just plain damn fool. But don't try to stretch your luck too far, Purcell. I'm riding with you, and if I was you I'd be mighty careful how I act. You can deliver that steer, and then you're coming with me."

Ben Huddith's ranch was in a little pocket back in the hills, a shoestring outfit owned by a man who was carried only by his stubborn refusal to be defeated. There was a brush and pole corral that contained the forty-odd head of outlaw



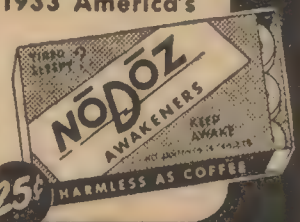
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steers Adam Purcell had roped out of the *brasada* and brought in, and beyond the corral was the garden plot old Ben Huddith had cleared and gouged-out of the hard earth. The ranch house was small and plain, with adobe walls and heat-curved shakes on the roof.

Riding at Purcell's side, Charley Fall said dryly, "The outfit looks poor enough to be honest. Who did you say owns it?"

Purcell gave the lawman a bitter glance. "Ben Huddith."

"Heard that name somewhere before," Fall grunted. Then he nodded shortly. "Sure. I remember now. Huddith is the outlaw who turned state's evidence when Blackjack Ringo's gang was captured several years ago." His stare rubbed across Adam Purcell's face, and acid was in his eyes. "You keep nice company, Purcell."

Purcell said plainly, "When you've been knocked around by trouble, maybe you'll have a right to pass judgment on men like Ben Huddith. He was outlawed because he rode out of a Confederate state and joined the Union. He turned state's evidence at that trial because he had a daughter to look after. You'd have done the same thing, Fall."

The lawman looked away. "Mebbe." His cold stare came back to Purcell. "You give Huddith a case, the way you tell it. What kind of excuses would you offer for the Tonto Kid?"

"Every man makes his mistakes."

The edges of the lawman's mouth tightened. "Are you calling that shooting up at Dodge a mistake?"

"You figure that one out," Purcell said to him.

"All right," Charley Fall said. "It figures like this. The Tonto Kid was a wild young hellion, no better and no worse than a lot of kids his age. He was a top hand on the rodeo circuits, and that made him think he was pretty big. He walked high and wide, and made a lot of enemies. When he got into that shooting scrape

and killed that card-cheat gambler, he stepped too far. He got a murder charge shoved against him."

Adam Purcell said bitterly, "Could be one of his enemies stole the gambler's gun to make that shooting look like murder."

"Uh-huh. Could be." Charley Fall nodded grimly. "But I wouldn't know about that. All I know is that a murder charge is still out against the Tonto Kid. My job is to bring him in for trial. I've been hunting him for three years now, and I think I've found him. What do you think, Purcell?"

"I think," Purcell said bleakly, "that you've ridden into more trouble this time than you'll know how to handle."

Purcell dragged the roped steer into the corral, and Mary was waiting in the doorway when he turned back to the ranch house. She was a tall girl, with strength in the slim lines of her body. Her hair was as dark as a raven's wing, and as she came to him he could see the release of worry in her eyes.

"When you didn't come home last night, Adam—" She didn't finish that, and laughed softly. "You gave us a scare, Adam."

Purcell said easily, "I was trailing a wild one and didn't want to let it get too far away." He watched the girl's glance move across to Charley Fall, and said, "An old friend of mine, Mary. I asked Charley Fall to stop in for a while."

She smiled at the lawman. "We're glad to have you, Mr. Fall." Strain made her voice uncertain. "But if I were you I believe I'd hide that badge while you're with us."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "Anything wrong with me being a lawman, miss?"

Adam Purcell spoke up grimly, "This is the far end of the state, Fall, and there are men in this brush who think that a law badge makes a mighty fine target. If you don't care about your own hide, then give a thought to the Huddiths. If the

word gets around that they've got a lawman under their roof—"

Mary Huddith said with swift alarm, "Someone's coming!"

Adam Purcell slanted a quick glance over his shoulder. He saw the thin track of dust clouding the air above the *mesquite* across the flats, and he heard the muted rattle of hoofs. He jerked around to the lawman.

"Get into the house, Fall, and keep out of sight. Mary, take his horse around back and hide it."

Charley Fall hesitated long enough to give his final warning. "Be careful, Purcell. You be mighty careful."

They were three of Link Dohenny's crowd who came out of the mesquite and approached the Huddith ranch house. Burt Dollar rode in the lead, as he always did, and Gus Horn and Joe Tyree flanked him. They reined in, and lined themselves in front of where Adam Purcell stood. Gus Horn nodded stolidly, and said nothing. Joe Tyree's small eyes flicked warily toward the house, searching the windows and the shadows beyond the open door.

"You got company here, Purcell?"

"Don't see any, do you?" Purcell said evenly.

Joe Tyree watched him with a corrosive stirring of interest. "You'd better stop eating meat, Purcell," he said softly. "One of these days you'll forget your manners once too often and find yourself in trouble. Where's the girl?"

"Inside."

Tyree grinned broadly, a slender, quick moving man with darkly humid eyes. "I'll go in and pass the time of day with her," he drawled. He swung out of saddle and started toward the door. Purcell caught his arm, pulled him around.

He said quietly, "She told you once she can do without your company, Tyree. Don't make a nuisance of yourself with her."

Tyree wheeled full around to face Adam

Purcell, and a rakehell temper lunged into his humid eyes. He said sneeringly, "You figure you've got that claim staked out for yourself, mister?"

PURCELL hit the man. He stepped close, slammed his fist to Tyree's stomach, and then clubbed a second blow to the man's face. Tyree sagged and went down. He rolled over in the dust, gagging for breath, hating Adam Purcell with his hot black eyes. He drew his legs under him slowly, starting to get up.

"I'll kill you for that, Purcell."

Adam Purcell stepped back a pace. He was wearing a gun, and he thought bleakly: *This is just what they wanted!*

He shifted his feet in the dust, balancing himself. Joe Tyree was taking his time in getting to his feet, giving Burt Dollar and Gus Horn time to get set. Gus Horn turned his horse slightly, throwing his holstered Colt into the clear.

"Some days it's a difficult dollar," he said tonelessly.

Burt Dollar spoke for the first time. "We warned you and Huddith to clear out of here. We heard about Huddith sellin' out to that Texas jury, and any man who'd live with him wears the same stripe. We warned you, Purcell. You should have listened a little closer."

Joe Tyree suddenly lunged erect. "Why talk?" he yelled, and his kill lust flared. "Get him!" His hand streaked gunward.

Adam Purcell drew and fired as Tyree's gun flashed out of leather. He saw his bullet smash into the man's chest, and as he threw himself desperately to one side he saw the twin black bursts from the guns of the other two. A blow sledged him on the side of the head, and he heard Mary's thin scream of horror from inside the house, and he knew vaguely that he was going down. He couldn't stop his fall. He was plunging into a bottomless pit, with darkness all around him, and only the distant smashing of guns registering

shallowly on his fading consciousness. He kept falling endlessly. . . .

He came awake slowly. At first he was aware of small familiar sounds coming to him and he listened to them with a thin, wondering curiosity. He heard the hissing of a tea kettle on the stove, and a busy movement around the room that he recognized as Mary's footsteps. He opened his eyes, and after a while he turned his head. Mary was standing beside his bed, looking down at him. He grinned faintly at her.

"If I'm dead, I've got no reason to complain. Mary, have I ever told you that you're a mighty handsome woman?"

Anxiety drained out of her eyes, and color rushed into her cheeks. She said with mock severity, "If you can still talk like that, you'll be all right. How do you feel?"

"Like I'd been kicked by a mule."

"Another fraction of an inch, and that bullet would have killed you," she said softly.

Adam Purcell remembered, then. Memory of the fight pried its way through the aching of his head. "What happened?"

"Your friend—Charley Fall—if it hadn't been for him, you'd have been killed, Adam. He shot Gus Horn, but Burt Dollar got away. Charley was bad hit."

Purcell sat up slowly. Late afternoon sunlight was slanting through the west window, with tiny particles of dust sliding down the bright shaft. He turned his head, and through the open bedroom door he could see the lawman lying on another bed.

"How bad?"

"Through the hip," Mary said. "He lost a lot of blood before I could stop it."

Purcell said grimly, "Where's Ben?"

Shadows of worry were in the girl's brown eyes. "Hiding the horses back in the brush. He helped me look after you and Charley Fall, and then he went out to hide the horses." She made a weary gesture with one small hand. "Burt Dol-

lar will be back with the rest of Dohenny's gang."

Purcell nodded. "Yes." He pushed up from the bed. The floor rocked unsteadily under him, and he was sick from the agony that throbbed in his temples.

"Coffee would help, Mary."

He felt a little better after he got the hot coffee into him. He stood there beside the bed, trying to think this out.

He said bitterly, "It's me and Charley Fall they're after now. Not you and your dad, Mary. You've still got time to get away."

She turned and faced him squarely. Her eyes were suddenly wet, with hurt resentment in them, and she spoke softly. "What kind of a woman do you think I am, Adam?"

That was all she would say. She turned away, locked and barred the front door. She leaned a rifle against each of the front windows, and placed shells near them. Her father came through the back door while she was doing this, a lank, angular man with eyes that were haunted by the troubles that had nagged his life. He looked at Purcell, and smiled faintly.

"This is going to be rough, Adam."

Purcell said softly, "You've got to think of Mary, Ben. There's still enough time for you and her to get away."

Ben Huddith shook his head. "A man can't spend all his life running away from his past. What peace would there be for Mary if we did? No, this time we'll stand and fight."

"All right, Ben."

Purcell turned away, and went through the door to Charley Fall's bed. The lawman's face was gray with pain, and sweat streaked his forehead. But his eyes were clear, as cold and grim as they had always been. His mouth twisted into a thin smile.

"This is a laugh. I came here to take you back to be tried and hanged. Then I get myself shot trying to keep you from being killed. You ought to get a

big laugh out of all this, I imagine, Purcell."

Purcell looked quietly at the lawman. "So you still think I'm the Tonto Kid."

"I know you are," Fall said grimly. "I saw you throw your gun on Tyree, and that was all I needed to know." He shook his head faintly. "I'm kind of sorry it worked out like this for you, Purcell. You're not the kind I figured. But that don't change anything. I've still got to take you in."

"You're forgetting about Link Doheny's gang and what they'll do when they get here," Purcell said. He watched the lawman for a moment. "Anything I can get for you, Fall?"

"A cigarette. I lost my makings in the fight."

Purcell built a smoke, lit it, and tucked it between the lawman's lips.

"One more thing," Charley Fall said. "You can slide that bed in the other room across to the window, and help me to it."

"You're in no shape to fight."

"Hell, I've got eyes and a trigger finger, ain't I?" Charley Fall grunted. "Do what I say, Purcell, and stop wasting time."

THE OUTLAWS came while the sun was sliding down behind the hills. They came down the road in a knot, seven of them, and when they cleared the brush and scrub trees they spread into a loose line and made their rush. They gave no warning, and they received none from the house. Ben Huddith's first bullet brought down one of them, and then Charley Fall raked out the window with his rifle barrel, and started shooting.

They drove the outlaws back, but the gang came at them again in a swift, murderous rush. Adam Purcell crouched at the window beside the lawman, and out there in the clearing he saw two saddles emptied by bullets from the house. He saw a rider come racing in toward the corner of the house, fired at him, and missed. He saw that outlaw leave his saddle in a dive that carried him close to the ranch house wall, and he saw the other three sheer off sharply and take cover.

Through the smoke-laced silence of the house came Charley Fall's dry grumble. "They're worse than Injuns, that gang. They'll snipe at us until that one on the

SENORITA SPITFIRE RUNS HER GUNS!

— by Bob Obets —

— A Novel —

Iron-fisted Captain Mike Redfern battled and licked Atlantic gales—for his precious stores were for General Lee—sneered at the gunhawks of lurking Southern traitors and laughed at blockading Yankee gunboats. . . . But the golden gungirl from Matamoros, Mike found, was a hellcat of a brighter, deadlier color.

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other side of the wall can fire the roof. After that, we're finished."

Adam Purcell stepped back from the window and loaded his gun. He looked down at the lawman, and for a moment bitterness changed the lines of his face. He spoke softly, so that only Charley Fall could hear.

"A man makes mistakes, but he always has to pay for them, one way or another. The law ain't always the only answer, Fall."

Then he closed the loading gate of his Colt. "Don't let that gang get to Mary. Save your last bullet for her, Fall."

He turned and went to the door. The sniping had started now, with bullets smashing the adobe walls and raking the windows. Purcell lifted the heavy bar away from the door. He cocked his gun, and for a moment felt the balanced weight of it in his hand. He turned and looked at Mary.

She was watching him from across the room, pale and frightened. He remembered all the things he had planned to tell her someday, and it occurred to him that this was his last chance. But it came to him that it would be less cruel if he kept those things to himself. She would have less to remember if she lived through this day; she would have less to forget.

He jerked the door open, stepped out, and lunged to one side. A bullet smashed the adobe beside him, and a man out there shouted a sharp warning. He didn't look in that direction. He wheeled to the corner of the house, and he saw the outlaw crouching there with one hand drawn back, ready to throw a torch of burning greasewood to the dry shakes of the roof.

In that fraction-second he saw fear slash the outlaw's eyes, he saw the torch drop, and saw the man's hand grab for the gun under his belt. Purcell sent his bullet into the outlaw's stomach.

A slug struck Adam Purcell's shoulder with the impact of a hurled club. It drove

him around and slammed him up against the wall of the house. He saw the three outlaws lunging up from the cover they had taken, and he fired a futile shot at Burt Dollar. He told himself that his bullet had gone too far to the left, and that he should change the angle of his gun.

He started running towards Burt Dollar. There was shooting from the windows of the house, and he saw one of the outlaws sag and go down. Link Dohenny shouted, spun toward his horse, trying to escape, but a bullet tripped him.

Purcell kept running blindly and senselessly towards Burt Dollar. The outlaw's gun was up in his hand, but for some reason he didn't seem to have the strength to trigger it. Not until after it was all over did Adam know Dollar had been dead on his feet all the time.

Purcell's sagging run carried him to the outlaw, and then he shoved his gun against the man's body and pulled the trigger. They went down together. Purcell rolled over, trying to get up, but the strength wasn't in him. . . .

Later, he looked up and saw Mary bending over him. He saw the wetness in her eyes, and the smile on her lips.

"Your friend Charley Fall rode away yesterday morning, Adam. That's how long you've been unconscious. He asked me to tell you something, Adam. He said he came here looking for a man he called the Tonto Kid. But he said he'd made the ride for nothing. He told me to tell you that he'd learned the Tonto Kid had been dead for three years, and that he imagined you would be glad to know it."

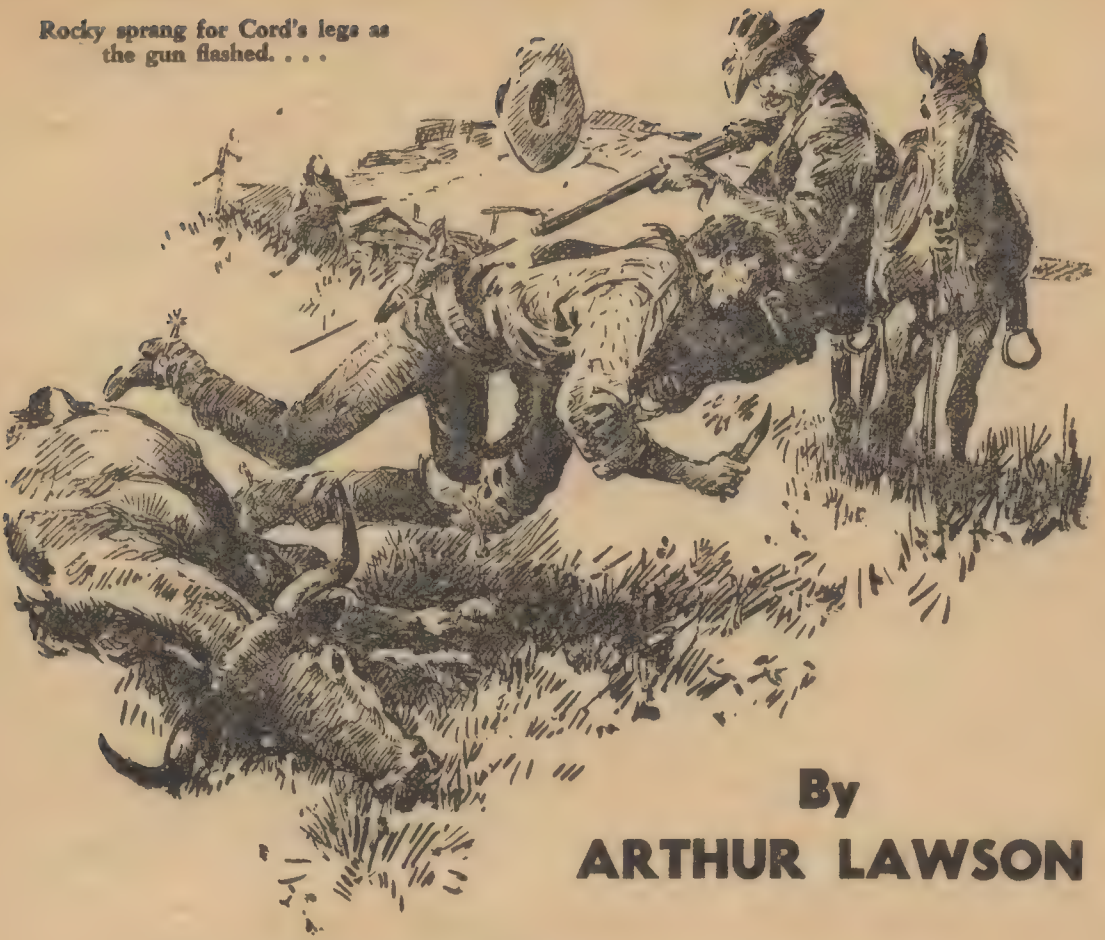
Adam looked up at the girl.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you are a mighty handsome woman, Mary?"

She wrinkled her nose at him in mock gravity. "Not yet."

"Sit down, Mary," he told her. "What I've got to say will take a lot of telling, and I've had to wait too long to let you know."

Rocky sprang for Cord's legs as
the gun flashed. . . .



By
ARTHUR LAWSON

*He was tagged with a killer's brand and no hombre
had the guts to stand up against him—till the time
came for a half-pint gal to play the final card in a
game where Death dealt aces!*

ROCKY MILES was a sociable man, though there were those who would not say so. He liked society just as long as it stayed out of High Valley. But once folks started crowding him he would become restless and ornery. It was even said by some that he had shot his nearest neighbor, old Man Harlan, though nobody could prove it. The bullet that had ended the rancher's life had been dug out with a bowie knife before the coroner got around to investigate, and the jury

had been obliged to put the killing down to "party or parties unknown." Yet the rumors persisted, and the murder brand was upon Rocky Miles.

Sometimes, on a Saturday night, down at Perk Owen's Saloon, Rocky would allow that it was to his advantage to be so branded.

"Keeps folks away," he said. "Keeps people from trying to push me around. Why do I care what people think so long as they leave me alone?"

GUN LAW TALLY

Perk Owen did not like that sort of talk in his place.

"I don't blame you for feeling sore about it," Perk told Rocky. "Only why don't you forget it? Everybody else has. Have one on the house, Rocky."

Perk was stout and pale with a head as bald as an eagle's egg, and fierce black mustaches that everyone was sure he dyed. Rocky Miles was lean and dark, like the eagle, himself, with surprisingly colorless hair. Rocky was twenty-five years old, about half Perk's age—and somewhere in between the two came Cord Allen. Cord would have made a good bullwhacker. He liked to prod people.

"It looks like whoever murdered old Harlan sure done you a favor," Cord said. "His grass right handy to you—and they're saying around town that you got his cows cheap, too. Dirt cheap."

"Now, listen, boys—" Perk tried to pacify them. "We talked all this over before. Rocky bought those steers at an open auction. You were there, Cord. How come you didn't bid if the price was right?"

"A man has his reasons," Cord said.

There was a humming in Rocky's ears, and a bunching of the muscles behind his neck. If Cord's words had been written in large white letters on the backbar mirror, they would not have been more plain. *If a man will kill his neighbor for his cattle, he'll kill anyone who tries to block him.* Cord had actually said that once, but not in Rocky's hearing.

"Just tell us this reason," Rocky said softly.

The talk had gotten out of hand. Perk Owen scooped up all the bottles on the back bar and set them on the floor. Men at the mahogany counter moved away, as if sleep-walking, to crowd the tables along the walls. Someone went for the sheriff.

"You were saying a man has his reasons," Rocky prompted.

"Those steers were too lean to ship,"

Cord finally answered, "and I didn't have any spare grass."

"You could of grazed them right where they were, and right where they still are. You could have rented that grass from the bank until the heirs are found."

"I could have, at that," Cord admitted. With one foot on the rail, he leaned heavily against the bar. His hip thrust out into the room and his coattails fell back to display his dark-butt six-shooter in its ornate holster. "But in two-three months, or maybe sooner, I'd have to move the beef and where'd I move it to?"

Beads of sweat stood out on Rocky's tanned forehead. He knew that Cord was leading him along in his conversation, bringing him up to some point where he would break. A shrug of his shoulders would have ended the talking, and no damage done. But Rocky had taken Cord's badgering as long as he could.

"I've had them up there for five months," Rocky said. "Maybe I can keep them there forever."

Cord's expression turned to one of great satisfaction. "Reckon it does look like you got that spot permanent," he said. "But I got news for you, Rocky. I hate to tell you about it. The heirs pulled into town today. They're camping down to the Okay Wagonyard. They're moving up into High Valley tomorrow. Harlan was my friend; and it just so happens I knew he had heirs who would want the place. That's howcome I didn't buy the beef."

Everyone in the room was stunned by the announcement. It had been assumed that Harlan was an old bachelor living under a false name.

"Want to meet these heirs?" Cord asked.

"Don't mind if I do," Rocky said.

MOST of Perk's patrons followed the two men from the saloon. The evening had a dusky, menacing quality to it, and the rattle of high

heels on the board walk echoed from the flimsy false-fronted buildings. The wagon yard smelled of manure, horses and hay. At one corner a couple of canvas-covered wagons were drawn up and a small fire had been built. A rather heavy-set woman squatted by the fire stewing a pot of beans. A man sitting against a wagon wheel snoking a pipe got up apprehensively as the posse advanced across the yard. The woman kept stirring at the pot, but her eyes followed the group of men, and Rocky was within a dozen feet of the fire before he saw the third member of the party. A wide-eyed girl with long black braids tied with red bows, and bare feet beneath a worn calico dress, sat on the seat of the smaller wagon. None of these people spoke.

"Evening, McCoy," Cord said. "I'm Cord Allen. I wrote you about the Harlan place."

McCoy's relief was obvious. "I'm damn glad to see you," he said. "We jest got in."

Cord pushed back his coat to display the heavy gold chain slung across his chest. Cord was a big-game hunter who kept his quarters crowded with mounted trophies. He carried mementoes of his hunt on his chain, too, in great profusion—the tooth of a grizzly bear, a nugget he had found, the claw of a cougar, and a rabbit's foot for luck.

"I got somebody here you want to

meet, McCoy," Cord said. "Your neighbor, Rocky Miles."

McCoy, the woman and the girl all froze as if they had heard the rattle of a snake. The woman put aside her pot of beans and stood up.

"Tell him, Pa."

McCoy did not want to tell Rocky anything. He shuddered and backed away.

"I don't mean to cause no trouble, Mr. Miles," he said. "But Harlan was my wife's oldest brother, and we got a perfect right—"

"You don't mean to cause what kind of trouble?" Rocky asked.

It is probable that McCoy would have run away right then and never come back, but he was more afraid of the woman than of Rocky.

"I heard tell about you," he said, faltering. "I heard about you, Miles." He was a little hysterical. "We'll leave dead bones lie, see. I got the farm. I don't have to have revenge. Ma and I talked it over."

Rocky laughed lightly. "Okay, neighbor," he said. "If that's the way you feel, you and me ought to get along real nice. I'd admire to take you back up to Perk's place and buy you a drink."

"Hell, no!" McCoy cried. He cleared his throat. "I mean, I sure appreciate it, but I ain't a drinking man, Miles."

Rocky shrugged. He tipped his hat to the woman, then to the girl. "Pleased to know you all," he said. "If there's any-

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thing you want when you get settled, just drop around. I got the only other place in the valley."

He wheeled away. The men trailed after. Up at the saloon Perk Owen was replacing the bottles on the back bar. Rocky helped himself to a drink. Perk's eyes were questioning.

"Like we were saying, Perk," Rocky told the barkeeper, "a real mean reputation is a handy thing to have. McCoy ain't going to push me at all."

"That ain't the point," Perk said. "The point is, when are you going to quit pushing yourself?"

Through field glasses Rocky watched the McCoy wagons coming up Massacre Pass into the valley. The leading wagon was covered with a white canvas tilt and was pulled by four big horses. The second wagon was big and heavy with a squarish brown cover and four yoke of oxen. There were a couple of cows and calves following, but no other cattle. A farm, McCoy had called the old Harlan place.

It was with growing excitement that Rocky watched the leading wagon. He would not admit it to himself, but he was waiting for the girl to show her dark head. When the wagon stopped, the dog that bounded down from it was a collie, not a hound—a sheep dog, not a hunter. A beefy man who could have been Cord Allen followed the dog from the wagon. He handed down the girl, first, then the older woman, who promptly bawled out McCoy for whacking the bulls.

Rocky put up his binoculars and on Monday morning he rode to town. There was only one way to get there within a reasonable time, and that was by the road that passed the McCoy's. Rocky went by at a good, fast lope on his best horse, and while passing the Harlan place he pretended not to notice that it was newly occupied. He could hear the voice of Mrs. McCoy resounding through the

little one-story shanty that had sufficed Harlan for a home. But of the younger one, and of the stocky man, there was no sign. McCoy, himself, was doggedly unloading the crates of chickens. Rocky gave him no howdy-do at all, but let him have the dust of his horse's passing. Coming into town tall in the saddle, Rocky checked up on the fact that Cord Allen was not in town, then stopped before the Cattleman's Trust Company.

The creak of leather, the sweat of a horse, the rattle of spurs, always pleased Rocky Miles. But he liked, too, the scrubbed smell of the inside of a bank. Someday he figured on owning one. The teller behind his cage glanced at the treasurer behind him, and both nodded. Like a weather vane pointing up an expected storm, Rocky thought, and hitched up the gunbelt that was galling the sharp point of his hip. As if by magic the door of the inner office opened and the president of the bank appeared. Rocky grinned at him.

"Where in hell's the red carpet?" he asked.

"There's no cause for alarm," the president said quickly. "No cause at all. I can assure you the McCoy's will be most cooperative."

"If there ain't any cause for alarm," Rocky said, "what are you people all sweated up over?"

"I've talked to McCoy," the president said. "McCoy's going to raise sugar beets. He's going to fence his property. I assure you he won't be running cattle on your grass."

Rocky sat with one haunch on the railing that separated the private from the public part of the bank, and swung his leg. Deliberately he let his spurs gouge at the palings. When you've got a rep for being tough, you got to live up to it.

"When I bought those cows," Rocky said slowly, "and hired Harlan's grass, we had some small printing put in the

agreement that when and if the heirs were ever found the estate would buy this all back if I wanted them to—plus recompense, whatever in hell that is, for any work I might have done. Plus a reasonable amount for the gain in numbers and weight of the cattle. You being executor, signed this."

The bank president nodded. "That's right," he said.

"Then take those cows off my range," Rocky said. "And beginning tomorrow I'll shoot every Box H beef I catch eating my grass."

The treasurer, safe behind his cage, spoke up.

"You might suggest, sir, that McCoy will be obliged to retaliate in kind."

"What sort of language is that?" Rocky snapped.

"He's saying—" the president said—"that if you shoot McCoy's cattle that happen to be eating your grass, McCoy will be justified in shooting any of your cattle that are eating his grass. I'd suggest—"

"That sounds good to me," Rocky said and walked out of there.

It was a quick trip across the street to Perk Owen's saloon. Perk set up a beer since Rocky never drank anything stronger except on Saturday nights.

"Still mad at yourself?" Perk said.

"I ain't mad at anybody," Rocky told him. "I've been a worried man, Perk. Been alone too much. Now I got neighbors. Who's the young one?"

"Name of Laurel," Perk said.

"And how about her husband?"

"Her husband don't have any name at all," Perk said, "but judging by the way Cord's been stomping around since she showed up in town, I'd be willing to lay a bet on what her husband's name is going to be."

"I got ten dollars!" Rocky said.

He put the money on the bar and Perk covered it.

"That gal's husband's name is going to be Miles," Perk said. "Rocky Miles."

ROCKY MILES reckoned he had better quit going down to Perk's. Everytime he stopped in there Perk turned him on his head and gave him something to think about when he would rather not think about anything at all. Perk had pulled a fast one on him that time, twisting the bet right there before his eyes and staying cool as iced beer on a hot day. It made Rocky feel he had better go down and take a good look at the girl in the daylight.

He fought it off. He fought against it for a couple of days that he spent close to home working out his rough string, doing little chores, everything but shooting cattle branded with the Box H.

The bet was a low trick that Perk had played on him, lower even than that crack Perk had made about him pushing himself around. It kept bringing him back to his field glasses to watch the goings on of the McCoy's. McCoy built a leanto on his shack. He built a chicken house. But at night a light often glowed behind the white canvas of the covered wagon, and early in the morning Rocky often spotted the girl stepping down from it to wash up behind the house where old Harlan had dug his well. When Cord Allen showed up for the third time Rocky figured he had better get busy carrying out the threat he had made to the banker. From the spot where he sat on the big split log step to his one-room cabin he could read the brands of half a dozen Box H steers. Deliberately Rocky got up, put away his glasses, broke out the old Winchester rifle, and set to work cleaning it. The barrel shone inside and out. The trigger and bolt worked smoothly as if muffled in velvet. The walnut stock was bright and warm. The steers grazed with no interest at all in Rocky's preparations. When he sent a shot humming past

the ears of the closest one, the steer didn't even run. He sniffed, glanced in the direction of the rifle blast and blinked his eyes. Slowly chewing his cud, he was a picture of reproach, like a small boy who is slapped for something that he has not done.

Rocky yelled at him, "Get going, you dumb brute!"

But the steer only sighed, and Rocky began to feel like a man who has been caught naked on a stage when the curtain goes up. All around him the steers were looking at him, twisting their heads rather than moving their bodies so they could look straight on, their big, brown, liquid eyes full of resignation, and the crinkly curls on their polls strangely feminine.

Then, like magic, and almost instantly, Laurel McCoy broke from the brush down by the river. She wore a calico dress and sat astride a big work horse. Her feet were bare, her hair was dark and glossy as Perk Owen's dyed mustache. Her eyes flashed.

"I know all about your threat," she shouted at him.

Amazed, Rocky sat on the split log, smelling the powder smoke he had just generated, and gaped at the girl. She brought her big horse to a halt before him.

"Where is that cow you killed?" Laurel snapped at him.

"Missed him," Rocky said. "But I won't miss the next one."

The girl's blue eyes made the sky look plain. Her lips were the color of the wild rose that grew at the head of the valley. Rocky wanted her to go away. She sure enough did not take after her pa, and if it was her ma she favored, he wanted no part of her.

"Let's see you miss another one," Laurel suggested.

Rocky stood up. This was a good rifle and he knew how to use it. He levered a cartridge into the receiver, lined up the sights, and squeezed the trigger. Powder

smoke made the girl sneeze. The bullet caught a steer right between the eyes and killed him instantly.

When the girl stopped sneezing she glared down at Rocky.

"I can't get off this horse with you staring at me," she said.

He suddenly realized that it had been a long time since he had seen a girl's bare knees. It would be a trick, getting off that horse modestly. Turning a slow red below his tan, Rocky glanced away. In an instant Laurel was beside him, smoothing her dress over her hips. There was not much of her. The top of her dark head would just about reach the center of Rocky's chin, and he would not be surprised if he could span her slender waist with both of his hands. The thought that he might touch her terrified him.

"Your gun, please!"

She took the rifle from him and steadied it on the hitch rack that Rocky had built in the days when he was still entertaining visitors. As he looked, perplexed, she shot one of his cows, then handed back the rifle.

"The score's even," she said. "And I'm going to keep it even, mister."

Without another word she swung aboard her horse and trotted off.

ROCKY was not the sort of man who would let good beef spoil, so he butchered the cow Laurel had killed and took it into town to sell it. His official story was that he had needed ready cash so he had killed the critter. But he told Perk Owen the truth.

"Damnedest thing I ever heard," Perk observed when Rocky told how the girl had taken the rifle away from him and casually shot the cow.

"Must of been spying on me down there in the brush, she showed up so quick," Rocky said. "Gives me an uneasy feeling just thinking about it. Got eyes looking at me all the time."

"Maybe if you'd go over to McCoy's and shake hands with the old man and call off your feud, the girl would leave you alone," Perk suggested.

Rocky said, "It's their feud. It ain't my feud. While I was butchering that beef the old lady showed up. She's got a tongue you could split kindling with."

Perk was interested in this new development. "Takes after her daughter, huh?"

"Laurel don't take after nobody. If you're asking me, they must have found her on the door step."

Perk filled Rocky's beer glass. "You want to add another ten to the pot?"

Rocky shuddered violently. Betting that Laurel's husband would not be named Rocky Miles was practically sure money.

"I got twenty," Rocky said.

A change in Perk's expression warned him. The swinging doors had slatted behind him and someone had come in. By twisting his head slightly he could see the reflection of Cord Allen in the back bar mirror. Perk mopped up the bar and greeted Cord.

"Fine day, Mr. Allen. The usual?"

Cord Allen's broad face had turned a permanent deep red. He stopped at the bar a good ten feet from Rocky and nodded his head to Perk who broke out a bottle of bourbon and filled a glass with beer. Cord took them both down neat. He slid his beer glass over to Perk and filled his jigger with more bourbon, and put these two away in quick succession. Ignoring Rocky in rather an obvious manner, he cleared his throat like a bullfrog getting set to croak down all opposition.

"You been around," he said to Perk. "You've seen a lot of good people and a lot of bad. Plenty hombres come in here and tell you all their troubles."

Perk hedged. "I don't know about that, Cord. To tell you the truth, I don't think about things like that."

"Well, here's one to think about," Cord said. "This one is about the man who shoots his neighbor's cattle and sparks his neighbor's daughter all at the same time. And more—" He tapped on the mahogany with blunt fingers—"he tells this girl he'll bushwack any gent who happens to come calling on her."

"Damned if that don't sound like Cord Allen," Rocky said to Perk.

Perk set to work putting the back bar bottles on the floor.

"Why you two fellers always pick this saloon as your battleground sure beats me," he wailed.

Cord's beefy shoulders hunched beligerently. "I just come in from the McCoy place," he said. "Ma McCoy was butchering a steer. Pa was cleaning his shotgun—and listen to this, Perk—that little girl, Laurel, was bawling. Crying like a kid. She says to me that Rocky Miles threatened to plug anybody, me especially, if I came calling on her."

"I got cotton in my ears," Perk said. "I can't hear anything you say. We could all go out back."

Rocky was thoroughly bewildered by this. It did not seem like the sort of story a girl like Laurel would tell. And certainly Cord did not have the imagination to think it up. He watched Perk setting the bottles on the floor. Then his eye caught Cord's glance reflected in the mirror.

"You denying that?" Cord shouted.

"I'm not a feller to go around calling a girl a liar," Rocky said.

Cord said, "I'm going out there whenever I please."

Rocky said: "You can put them bottles back where they come from, Perk. A barking dog don't bite."

"Maybe not," Perk said. "But where there's smoke there's fire."

There was Perk again, giving Rocky something to think about. Rocky swore he would never go back into that saloon as long as he lived. He'd had a good life

before somebody shot old Harlan and he got blamed for it and Perk started putting ideas into his head. Now all he did was worry, looking for the fire that caused the smoke that made the girl invent that story that she had told to Cord Allen. Just stirring up trouble, that was all, he decided. She was trying to make Cord mad enough to challenge him to a fight. Well, why not? That little girl wasn't worth fighting over, but Cord was becoming too big a nuisance. Get tough with Cord and maybe the McCoy's would clear out. . . .

Rocky, cooking a late supper in his cabin, thought about this and felt lonesome. Having the feeling that eyes were looking at you all the time made a man uneasy. But if they were the deep blue of Laurel McCoy's eyes, the uneasiness had a pleasurable quality, and Rocky was even prompted to shoot another Box H steer to bring those eyes out of the woods.

The beat of hoofs galvanized Rocky into action. He moved the frying pan to the side of the stove, turned out the lamp and dropped to the floor all in a couple of seconds.

"Who's that?" he shouted through the open door.

"It ain't nobody," a tired voice answered. "It's McCoy."

"What you doing with that shotgun, McCoy?" Rocky answered.

"I'm carrying it," McCoy said, "and that's all I figure on doing with it." McCoy sat on the split log that served as a step in front of Rocky's shack. He leaned the gun against the wall, and Rocky got up off the floor to join him. "I don't know why I ever married that woman," McCoy said. "I don't know why anybody ever marries any woman." He cocked a pale, blue eye at Rocky. "You all set to marry my daughter?"

"Hell, no!" Rocky bellowed. "That half-pint cow-killer? Hell, no!"

McCoy shrugged in defeat. "That's

what I told Ma," he said. "Why'd he want to marry our daughter? But when Ma gets an idea, she's stuck with it. There's a handsome man up there, she says, and down here we got a good-looking daughter, even if she is worthless! Marry them up and this cattle killing will stop, Ma says."

"You can tell Ma it ain't a deal," Rocky said.

McCoy said, "That Cord Allen has been mighty persistent."

"Ma told you to say that, too," Rocky suggested.

McCoy nodded. "Ma's going to give me the devil when I get back home, Mr. Miles. You ain't got a jug stashed away?"

"I thought you weren't a drinking man?"

"I ain't—when Ma's around."

Rocky broke out his jug, and they talked of many things. When Rocky finally set the older man on the floor of the buckboard where he could not fall out, McCoy gave him one final piece of advice.

"Let Allen have her," he said. "Serve him right."

IT WAS a fine, clear morning with mists along the river and the sharp details of a photograph on the hills. From the McCoy chimney came a tendril of woodsmoke. Washing up at the tin basin behind the shack was Laurel McCoy, and, though he had plenty of chores to do today, Rocky Miles had propped his field glasses against a tree to hold them steady and was studying the scene below. This was all in the interests of the feud, he assured himself, he had to check up on the girl to see what she would do next, to find out the meaning of the lie she had told to Cord Allen.

There was a catch in his throat that he attributed to the sharp morning air, and a hurried sensation in the center of his chest that he could not explain at all as the girl in the binoculars threw back

her head to brush her hair while the bright sun rays reached down to her. She was laughing. She was happy. And not long afterwards, Rocky found out why. Cord Allen rode into the yard. Cord carried a Winchester in his saddle boot, and he swaggered manfully when he stepped down from the saddle. McCoy came out to say, "Howdy."

Rocky Miles hitched up his pants and went down to the corral to saddle his best horse. Then he went back to the house to comb his unruly hair. He slung a six-shooter on his hip, and stepped into the saddle.

It was a short ride down to McCoy's. McCoy was building a chicken coop. Ma was inside the shack like a black cloud preparing to burst into a thunderstorm complete with forked lightning. McCoy set down the hammer.

"Mornin', neighbor," he said apprehensively glancing to the house.

Rocky scowled. "Somebody's running a ranny on me," he said, "and I aim to find out who's at the bottom of it. Trot 'em out, McCoy."

"Can't," McCoy said. "They rode off somewhere."

"Where's somewhere?" Rocky shouted. "How would I know?" McCoy asked. "When a feller comes sparking a girl at daybreak, there's no telling where they'll ride to. It ain't natural."

Rocky was beginning to feel crowded again. Ma could not keep her nose out of this affair any longer. She put her broad, kindly face out the door.

"You ain't welcome around here any more, Mr. Miles," she said. "Any man who'll go back on his word and break a girl's heart had better keep away."

"That's right!" McCoy said.

Rocky opened his mouth, then quickly shut it. He would just as soon stick his head into a tiger's mouth as talk back to Ma. Too late now he realized his mistake in coming down here. The old approach was the best: make them come to him. His defences were down. Then he heard the shot. All three heard it, and all three pairs of eyes turned their glances toward Rocky's place.

Ma instantly shouted at McCoy. "Pa, you go up and make that girl stop shooting Mr. Miles's cattle. Just because he's a savage is no reason we should act the same way."

WOLF MAN OF THE CRIMSON ICE

By Walt Coburn



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Rocky did not wait to hear what McCoy had to say. He wheeled the horse and put the spurs to him. Another shot guided him, and a third, and when he came down into a little glen beside the river he saw Cord Allen there standing over a dead cow. Cord had a rifle in his hand when Rocky rode up and dismounted.

"Where's McCoy's whelp?" Rocky snapped.

Cord ran his tongue over his upper lip.

It came to Rocky slowly, but with great clarity, that he had played the fool and had ridden into a trap. This was not his land on which he stood, nor was that one of his steers. The Box H brand was plain upon it. They could kill him here, and they could have the evidence to show the sheriff—caught red-handed killing McCoy beef as he had threatened. He had fought back, they would say, and they had killed in self-defence.

Rocky kept his hand away from his holstered pistol.

"Your story won't hold," Rocky said. "The sheriff'll examine the bullet that killed that steer, and everyone knows the groove I put in my gun."

"He won't find it," Cord said. "There'll be blood on your hands, too, Rocky. Come on over here and dig that bullet out with your knife."

Rocky walked slowly toward the steer. Kneeling down beside the dead beast, he took his knife from his pocket.

"You killed old man Harlan," Rocky said.

"What nobody knows, won't hurt nobody," Cord said. "Get going."

Rocky had to know one more thing. "That girl knows—she just heard you admit it."

Cord laughed. "She's up to your place—looking for you."

There it was, all the cards on the table—all the cards but one, that is, the card that the girl was to play. Her rifle banged

in the brush, and its bullet hummed between the men. Rocky sprang for Cord's legs. Cord's bullet seared Rocky's rump, but Rocky threw Cord. The girl came running out of the woods shouting. Rocky raked his knife down the middle of Cord's back while the heavier man tried to lever another cartridge into the receiver of his Winchester. Rocky slashed Cord's wrist, forcing him to drop the rifle. Cord reached for the bowie knife he always carried in a handy holster down the back of his neck. Rocky jammed a knee into Cord's face. At the same time he got Cord's wrist in both of his hands and twisted. The bone snapped with the sound of a bull whip.

Rocky took away Cord's knife.

"I just couldn't trust him," she said. "I came back and—" She did not have to explain further.

Rocky was watching Cord lying on the ground. Cord's shirt and coat had been cut almost entirely from his body, and the fight had been cut out from his heart. His watch chain sprawled limply on his chest. On one end dangled a chunk of lead.

"What's that bullet on your chain, Cord?" Rocky asked. Cord turned white. He made a quick reach for the chain but Rocky beat him to it. He hefted the piece of lead in his palm, a bullet from a Winchester, flattened out where it had struck one of Harlan's ribs.

Rocky stood back. He would let someone else tell the girl about this bit of lead. Now all he could tell her was this: "We'll be good neighbors from now on out, Miss Laurel. I mean, you and I'll be good neighbors with your ma and pa even if he did threaten me with a shotgun. Now, let's get Cord into town."

"You don't have to take me," she said. "I'll tell ma I lied. I'll tell everybody."

"You wouldn't do that, honey," he countered. "It wouldn't be the truth. Any feller comes courting you will have to answer to me—and I mean it!"



Dan swung and jerked the carbine out of the saddle boot, cocking it as he moved away. . . .

SATAN'S SADDLEMATE

"When you carry a big brag, mister, you better carry a big gun!"

TOWARD sundown Dan Jordan rode out of Jacksonville on his new horse to tell the Hays goodbye, regarding the visit with more sheepish guilt than regret. It spilled temper through his tall, stringy body to reflect that Polly Hay

always made him feel like a deluded fledgling though she was a couple of years younger than himself. She could be mighty lofty and condescending when it came to considering a man's own life. Dan hoped she wouldn't show that side tonight, but

By GIFF CHESHIRE

it was possible she would, being Polly.

The Hay camp was in a low tangle of hills up Daisy Creek, sheltered from the fading October sun by great conifers and the low-growing chaparral that carpeted this lower edge of southwestern Oregon, here where the last mountains rose between the free land of the Oregon Country and California's big gold boom. A loaded wagon stood near, and up the creek the team was staked in lush bottom grass. As he rode up, Dan saw Polly's small shape against a supper fire. He thought he saw recognition and quick pleasure come into the attention she turned back to her work. Dan almost let himself grin. It looked as though she thought he had decided to throw in with them, after all.

Enos Hay was reclining on a blanket under a tree, staring Dan's way and seeing nothing. He had lost his sight ten years before, he had told Dan. "Evening, sir," Dan said, and stepped down from the saddle. "Evening, Polly." He kept casual, hoping they would take it that way.

Even at the distance the difference in their sizes was apparent to Dan. Polly was pretty and strong, but always struck him as too small to have a woman's growth and feelings, though a man could see she had her share of both. She was perceptive in a way that amazed and annoyed him usually, wholly settled in her mind and closed to a man's reasoning. She had a simple, thrifty patience and industry that came from a farm east of the Big Muddy, as had kindred qualities in himself. By and large, he couldn't make her out, and in a case like that a man was wise to dismiss the matter.

"You got yourself a horse and saddle, I see," Polly said, without looking at him. "For the price, I expect you could have bought a good plough team."

"A man buys a horse that fits his needs," Dan said. He saw a frown on her father's lean face, for Polly had couched her remark to tell him what was up. She

had a way of talking so that Enos could follow a conversation even without seeing the implications of manner, expression and visual circumstances. "Trader come through from the Willamette," he added. He was proud of this trim-barreled beauty.

Enos had caught on, but he didn't say anything. For a moment Dan felt a touch of the regret that had been missing earlier. Enos aimed to find his donation land claim up in the Sterling Creek country and settle there with Polly. But most of the responsibility was going to fall on her. Enos claimed he could plough as straight a furrow as a sighted man, but Dan doubted it; the man was handy enough, doing what he could, but naturally he had his limitations.

Another thing that bothered Dan was the fact that, settlers and miners put together, the whites in this region were greatly outnumbered by the waspish Rogues and Klamaths. Their train had already got a taste of Indian trouble back beyond Bloody Point, on the Applegate cut-off. A blind man couldn't fight unless he could see something to shoot at. But there were three platoons of cavalry over at Fort Lane, on the Rogue, Dan had heard. As for his own responsibility, he had helped the Hays all the way across the plains. They had no right to expect more, nor had they indicated that they did. There had just been Enos's hints about the available land all about them and Polly's scornful attitude toward his wish to try California, where half the male settlers in Oregon had already gone.

"So you're hitting up to Sterling Creek in the morning," Dan said. By excluding himself from the venture, he put the seal upon their separation.

"Daylight," said Enos Hay, and that was all.

Now Polly looked at Dan, directly into his eyes. Something kind and friendly came into her face, and it eased him. "Thanks, Dan. Not many would have gone out of their way to help us, like you did

all through. I hope you find what you're looking for down there. Maybe you will. I guess I don't know everything."

She couldn't have done anything worse to him than change her attitude all at once. He swallowed and took her hand, then shook hands with Enos. Then he mounted and rode out. Clear around a twist in the gully he wanted to look back, but he didn't let himself.

DUSK was settling over Jacksonville when he rode back into the mining camp and put up his horse at a livery. The town's life was sucking in from the gulches and its structures were beginning to fill. Dan went to the hotel, hoping to find Cleve in their room, Cleve Engel who was going to be his new saddle-mate. But Cleve wasn't there. Left unexpectedly lonely and troubled by his parting with the Hays, Dan returned to the lively streets.

As he expected, he found Cleve at Larson's, which was the camp's noisiest dead-fall. It was already half filled with bearded, red-shirted, hard-drinking miners, though this small diggings at the north foot of the Siskiyou was nothing to what lay on the California side. And Dan was not surprised to find Cleve at a secluded table with Belle Nemers. Dan thought Belle frowned at him as he came up, though she quickly changed the expression to a shallow smile.

"Howdy, Dan," Cleve said. "You got back quick. Have any trouble shaking loose from your charges?"

Dan grinned and shrugged, wishing Cleve hadn't put it quite like that. He looked at his new comrade, whose attention already had returned to the girl. Cleve was dark and big, though smooth and swift as a big cat, and his brown face had an attraction everyone felt. His manner was easy and engaging, and he was about the most colorful individual Dan had ever encountered.

"So you two're shaking our dust off your heels," Belle said, looking at Dan.

Dan met her eyes, wondering suddenly if there was another woman who didn't like their pulling out. A fair, willowy and beautiful woman, Belle's face at times was a little jaded, her eyes tired. Except when she sang here, she was free to do as she liked, and when she sang it was in a voice rich in vitality and promise. Something always came up in Dan when he listened to her songs, which held him still and sent his dreams running far ahead. When she was free, and Cleve was around, she had been spending most of her time with Cleve.

"California bound," Cleve said, and picked up one of Belle's hands. She let him keep it, and presently she met Cleve's eyes. It was that which told Dan he was not wanted at this table.

He had never acquired a taste for drinking, anyhow, so he spoke an easy excuse

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and went out. He was wondering how it would feel to draw and hold the attention of a woman like Belle Nemers, in the easy, almost indifferent way Cleve did. Cleve had held her interest from the time, three nights back, he had first entered the place. But a thing had happened that might have helped Cleve. He had whipped a man there, that first evening, a big miner full of tangle-leg, who had been spoiling for trouble and cowing most of the customers till he laid a familiar hand on Belle. Then Cleve had nailed him, and there had been a crashing, furious fight.

Belle had already been in Jacksonville. She hadn't seen Cleve when the Modoc party hit the wagons near Bloody Point, almost at the end of the emigrant trail. Dan could relive it in minutest detail. There had been no warning, no time to circle the wagons and dig in, only shrieks and arrows and the crackling of contraband guns. No man on the train put up a more spectacular defense than Cleve Engel, and the emigrants supported him so stoutly they beat off the war party within the hour, suffering only a few wounded and no dead.

The main train had gone on down the Rogue, heading for the expansive lands of the southern Willamette. A few wagons had turned off to Jacksonville, the Hays' with them, and since he was driving their wagon for his passage, Dan went with the Hays. It had pleased him when Cleve, riding saddle, had come along. But there was an enormous vigor, a continual restlessness in Cleve. He wanted none of Oregon's free land, nor of the piddling placer mining here and over on the Illinois. He had nearly taken the California cut-off, anyhow, and soon regretted that he hadn't. Now he was going, over the Yreka trail, and he had astonished and flattered Dan by asking him to come along.

Dan had puzzled a little over why Cleve had wanted to take up with a stringy, slow and simple man off an Illinois farm. Yet

at the campfires on the trail Cleve had always liked Dan's shy but evident admiration. He had responded to it and opened up with his tales about his experiences. He was probably ten years older than Dan's twenty-two; possibly he had taken a sort of big-brother interest. Perhaps he understood how deeply Dan Jordan hungered to become such a man, to live a life of vitality and color, to attract the attention of women like Belle Nemers. . . .

DAN was in good spirits when they left Jacksonville in the early afternoon, taking the Yreka trail. The start put an uneasiness in Dan of which he was ashamed, for the Siskiyou were mostly claimed by the Klamaths, boldest of the local truculent tribes. But he had a new revolver on his belt, a new carbine in the boot of his new saddle all of which, with the horse, had nearly exhausted the money with which he had once intended to start himself on a piece of Oregon land.

There was no such anxiety in Cleve, who rode his saddle lightly, seeming almost asleep. There was a wondrous ease in the man, and this, Dan guessed, was part of his charm. They skirted foothills, heading eastward along the enormous flat bottoms of Bear Creek. By mid-afternoon Cleve seemed to have caught his half-waking nap and was ready to talk. He yawned widely, grinned at Dan and said, "We'll make a early camp. And you can look out for Injuns. I'm going to sleep."

"Figure to send for Belle when we get located?"

"Me?" Cleve threw back his curly dark head and laughed. "Kid, California's full of women. It's full of the gold dust it takes to get 'em. But we'll have to dig ours first. Man told me to try the Feather. Then we'll see the sights. Kid, Jacksonville's nothing to what I've heard about them places down there."

For some reason Dan kept recalling the Hays, who by now would be well on their way to Sterling Creek, which, from what he had heard, lay at a tangent to them, somewhere to the west in those crinkled foothills. It angered him that he should keep feeling guilty about leaving them on their own. Polly had caught up a gun in the fight on the cut-off, but Enos Hay had been obliged to sit and listen to death howling and crackling all about without being able to see it. Dan reckoned that had been hard on the man, yet it would make similar trouble in the future doubly hard on Polly.

FROM the start Polly had frowned upon the growing friendship between him and Cleve, Dan knew. Once she had flatly called Cleve a show-off, a poor pattern for the likes of Dan Jordan to follow. And once Dan had tried to tell her how he felt about the land, about the burning new hungers that had come alive in him with the venture into the West. Uncle-raised, he could remember nothing but a life of hard work and denial. At first he had thought that claiming his own would make a difference in how he felt about it. Instead, getting acquainted with Cleve, he had only grown to dislike the plough and all that went with it the more. Polly Hay had answered his awkward admissions by calling him a fool. Likely she still considered him one for turning down a hardscrabble claim on Sterling Creek for the panorama of California.

In late afternoon Cleve borrowed Dan's carbine to try a shot at a grouse, and missed it. He slid the weapon into the empty boot of his own saddle. "You ain't learned to use this baby yet, kid. If we hit trouble, I aim to put it to work. Expect it carries farther than a arrow." For some reason Dan didn't like giving up the gun, but Cleve was right. He let it go at that.

Ashland Mills passed behind them in late afternoon, and not far ahead were the first switchback rises of the Siskiyou pass. Two miles beyond the village Cleve lifted a restraining hand. "Strikes me we'd be smart to make camp, kid, and tackle the big hump by daylight." It suited Dan, for the mill and few scattered cabins about it made the last settlement in the next thirty miles.

They rode on to a creek that tumbled out of the encroaching foothills and made their camp, afterward smoking through a soft twilight while Cleve yarned. A sense of ease came to Dan. What was behind, was behind, and what lay ahead was the thing that counted. He grew drowsy and was nearly asleep when Cleve spoke sharply.

"Listen."

A horseman was coming down off the high mountain sweeps, riding fast. As the drumming grew louder, Cleve shoved to his feet, lifted out his revolver and stepped to the black shadows on the blind side of the campfire. Dan moved in a crouch to a place beside him.

The rider swung down from the trail and loomed in the firelight. Dan's pulse quickened when he saw the dusty, worn uniform of a dragoon wearing a corporal's chevrons. There was a scowl on the trooper's face, a hard light in his eyes as the light struck them. Cleve stepped into the open, shoving the revolver back into its holster.

"You better turn back," the corporal said. "I'm riding despatch out of Fort Jones for Fort Lane. Injun trouble on the Klamath. That whiskery Tipsu Tyee likely. Wiped out some prospectors. Good reason to think Tipsu sent a band down the Little Applegate. That's over west a few miles. You better turn back to the mill, anyhow, till Fort Lane can get a platoon out." He swung his horse.

"Wait!" Dan said. "West of here? That be anywhere near Sterling Creek?"

The trooper grinned bleakly. "Close enough. The creek empties into the river." Spurs drove in, and horse and rider were gone.

Cleve kicked out the campfire. "Kid, we're getting back to the village. Take that dragoon the rest of the night to reach Fort Lane, and the soldiers another day to get up here."

Sweat was dripping onto Dan's sides, and a terrible weakness had hit his knees. He said, "Cleve, could we get across to Sterling Creek?"

Cleve was slinging his roll, and he looked up sharply. "Ah, that girl with the blind pappy. That's where they headed, ain't it?"

"Must be other settlers in there, too. Mountains sort of cut it off from everything."

Cleve looked westward. "Them mountains climb three thousand feet, with the woods full of Indians. They got soldiers hereabouts to tend to 'em. We'll go back to the mill. Enough people there we could put up a scrap, if we have to." There was an intent look in his eyes, a twist on his face Dan had never seen before. He swung out into the darkness to where their horses were staked.

Looking west, Dan saw the enormous lift of the obscure mountains, which already had turned malevolent because of his knowledge that warlike Indians were prowling or camped up there. But he also visualized Sterling Creek, which Enos Hay had described as one of the country's starting settlements. Enos was blind, he could not fight Indians. If they got into trouble, it would be up to Polly. She was good with a gun but she was a woman.

When Cleve returned leading his mount, Dan said, "Cleve, back there about seven miles a couple of creeks came out of that jog into the hills. I got a feeling a man could follow one over."

The ease, the friendliness, the dash had gone out of Cleve's face. He began to

saddle his horse, working fast. He fumbled the cinch, and it was that which surprised Dan with an awareness that the man was nervous. Sickness hit Dan in the pit of the stomach; it was just too small and isolated a rescue to interest Cleve Engel. Cleve got his cinch fastened and swung up.

"Cleve, I aim to go across," Dan said.

"You'll get yourself scalped. Don't be a fool, kid. What they got the army out here for?"

Dan caught the horse's bridle. "I'll take my carbine."

Cleve struck at his hand. "If you can get it. I aim to have a good gun in my hand if trouble starts."

Dan reached, catching Cleve by the jacket and jerking him from the saddle. Cleve batted out in surprise, swearing as he crashed on the ground. Dan never even thought of the fight this man had put up in Jacksonville, nor his own lack of experience. He drove a fist into Cleve's face when the man tried to rise, and he kept hitting him until Cleve rolled over onto his back and began to kick. Dan swung and jerked the carbine out of the saddle boot, cocking it as he moved away.

"Climb your horse, Cleve," he said. "Get on back to the mill. There'll be audience enough there so you can screw up your nerve."

Neither spoke again. Cleve Engel brought a sneer onto his face, but he respected the gun in Dan's steady hand. He mounted again, riding away without looking back, without farewell. For an instant Dan stood aghast at what he had done. He knew he would never have the courage to strike out for California and adventure himself. And Cleve would never forgive him for this, even if he could find him again. He got his own horse and saddled it and rode out, his back now toward Yreka and what lay beyond.

He skirted the darkened village and went on for another five or six miles,

veering into a broad notch in the foothills until, pressed against them, he came upon a creek. It was what he sought, and he pointed into its closely hugged gorge. Fear pressed in with the mountain walls, tightening his chest and putting a hard knot between his shoulder blades. He checked both guns with numbed hands, and he found a kind of comfort in the warm life in the horse.

It was a good animal, but tired, and it might not have what he was asking of it. There was the barest moon, and he wondered if more light would help or only increase his numbing dread. A mile up the gulch he encountered his first outward uncertainty, when he came into an oblong bowl where the scant trace he followed forked, a branch cutting hard to his right. He stuck to the creek for another hour, when the bowl ended, mountain slants lifting abruptly ahead. He tackled these, taking a modicum of comfort in the fact that no war party would be apt to follow so rugged a route.

HE COULD make out a towering butte ahead and above, the best passage seeming to lie to the north. He must have climbed a thousand feet in the next mile, but he was rewarded when the land again fell away. There he had his first real scare, when something moved with a racket off to his left. Dan pulled his horse, his heart crashing against his ribs as the noise traveled away from him. A bear, probably, but he sat motionless for a long while, catching his breath.

He went on, following declining folds, and an hour later came upon the head of a gulch which presently produced a creek. Dan knew then that he was across. The way opened steadily, and not long thereafter he saw the distant light of a settler's cabin. A dog barked as he rode up. He saw figures as they moved within the structure and cast their shadows upon the

scraped deerskin of the window. He made out a small pole barn, and a man appeared in the opening door of the cabin, highlighted so that the gun in his hand showed plainly. Dan called a salutation, got a response and rode in.

"This Sterling Creek?" Dan asked the bearded, undershirted settler.

"That's what they call it." A tousled child looked out around the man's legs.

"See anybody come in today? A blind man and a girl?"

"Well, yes," said the settler. "Outfit like that pulled past this afternoon. Headed down the creek. Into the Applegate, maybe. Didn't talk to 'em beyond a howdy. You out of Jacksonville? Thought you come down from the hills."

"Come across," Dan said. "Met a trooper out of Fort Jones, on the Yreka trail. Said Injuns're moving. Said a band may be headed this way. Figured you people might want to go in to Jacksonville till Fort Lane can get men up here."

The man spat into the darkness of the yard. "We get a lot of Injun scares. Don't even stay up nights for 'em, no more. You want something to eat?" But Dan had driven spurs and ridden off.

He pointed down creek, knowing it was heading him toward the Little Applegate, through negotiable country where the dreaded war party could well be encountered. He devoutly hoped it was only a scare. He knew the settler had been stretching his indifference a little; the man had looked worried.

An hour later Dan raised a campfire, into the light of which bulged the partial shape of a covered wagon. Dan called out in relief, and as he rode in a clad figure rose from blankets, catching up a rifle.

"Polly!" Dan called. "It's me—Dan Jordan!"

The gun lowered, and it seemed to Dan that the small shape sagged for a moment. Enos Hay sat up in his blankets, staring

Dan's way, a slight smile on his lips. Dan swung down and tied his horse to a wagon wheel.

"Dan," Polly said, in the softest voice.

But there was a note of triumph in it. Dan spoke gruffly. "Seen a trooper who said the Klamaths're on the prod. He was hitting for Fort Lane to send up dragons." He looked at Hay. "Enos, I come past a settler's place back there. You better go down and fort up with him till the soldiers get between you and the redskins."

Enos Hay looked worried but said nothing. Polly's eyes widened, and she cast a quick, unconscious look at the dark forest above them. In a moment she said, "Dan, we've staked our claim. We aim to live on it. If trouble's coming, we'll meet it here. You're not beholden to us. But don't try riding over those mountains again. Go back to Jacksonville and take you a fresh start for California when they clear the trails."

"Enos, I'll hitch up and take you in," Dan told her father.

Hay shook his head. "Obliged to you, Dan, and for your turning back. But Polly's right. We drove our stakes, today. Reckon we got to see if we can keep 'em in the ground. After all, it's only somebody's notion they're heading through here."

Dan off-saddled and staked his horse, and when he came back to the camp Polly had dished up a plate of stew. Scowling, Dan emptied the water pail on the coals, but he ate the food. He was angry clear through, at them for refusing to go to safety after he'd troubled to warn them, at Polly for the way she had looked when he came back, at both for pinning him here till the troops came through.

"What happened to your friend Cleve?" Polly asked.

"Went to rescue a flour mill. I'll meet up with him over there in a day or so, likely." It struck Dan that maybe he

could, at that, and maybe he could talk Cleve into being saddlemates again. He recalled what Polly had said about Cleve at the start, calling him a show-off and blow-hard, and the fact that Cleve had shown a little of that stripe only made Dan madder at her.

Enos Hay pulled on his boots, and they sat in the darkness for what seemed unending hours. Dan wondered if they listened to the woods as hard as he did, felt the same dry, hurting throat, the same tremulous pulse. They gave no sign. The first pale wash of dawn made the tensions more unendurable, if anything. Indians disliked the forests at night, but daylight would see them on the stir, if there were Indians in this vicinity. Not knowing was worse than being sure that there were.

At dawn Polly said, "Here's where we aim to raise our cabin. We can see quite a way around. Can't we make a breakfast fire?"

"Cold breakfast," Dan said.

She shrugged passively and set to work, and Dan saw how tired she was. It struck him for no reason how pretty she had turned since they parted company in Jacksonville. After breakfast, Hay got out a whipsaw and tested the sharpness of the teeth with a calloused thumb. Dan helped Polly straighten camp and frowned when she started away with her father, who carried the saw.

"Where you going?"

"To fall some trees. We've got a cabin to raise before winter. A barn to build."

He turned away and moved off in the other direction. Later, when he heard the sharp whine of the saw, a stark anger ran through him. He walked to the edge of the woods. Like a young and muscular boy, Polly was whip-sawing with her father, smoothly, tired as she looked. Dan caught the traveling grip on her side.

"I'll run this end."

Without breaking rhythm, Polly said,

"The Hays claim the land—they'll raise the cabin. You're beholden to nobody, Dan Jordan. You're as free as the birds up here. In fact, you're an extra mouth to feed. Why don't you kite right out again?"

He nearly did, but changed his mind as he approached his tethered horse. But once he knew they were safe he would burn a trail over those mountains. He went down the creek a way, the carbine on the crook of his elbow. The bottom meadows broadened; they peeled back in wheeling wings upon the Little Apple-gate.

It was good soil, better than he had worked at home. He felt it, working it in his fingers. His attention fell upon a knoll that would make a fine building site.

He broke his gaze away, scowling.

He kept thinking of California and he kept thinking of women like Belle Nemers, with dreams in their songs and promises in their eyes. He kept thinking of Cleve Engels, a slightly flawed Cleve now, maybe, but laughing and vigorous and ready to dust it when he got tired of a place.

He kept remembering all the years in which he had learned to hate the land.

It was mid-afternoon when a squad of troopers under a corporal rode swiftly through, calling a greeting but thundering on. It gave Dan more of a shock than anything, for with them between the Hays and the Indians he had no further need to linger here. Polly realized that, too, for she and her father came down from the timber.

"I'll give you an early supper before you go, Dan."

For some reason it eased him. And he found within himself a grudging liking of the way they had set themselves upon a claim, solidly, beyond being scared off. There was nothing flashy in that, but it was courage.

That kind of courage didn't care whether anybody saw it or not.

"No rush," Dan said, and found himself grinning.

It might have gone differently if Polly hadn't looked so sort of joyous then. It spilled something in Dan Jordan that felt good right to his toes. Washing at the creek, Enos Hay rose, turned around and put his sightless eyes upon them.

"Dan, there's a building site down a piece she liked even better than this one."

"You shush," Polly said.

Enos went on boldly. "Wouldn't hear to us claiming it, either. Wasn't expecting it so soon but said someday mebbe somebody who'd make good neighbors'd be along hunting a place to settle down. Wanted to save the purtiest one to catch his eye." He chuckled and moved off to towel himself.

Polly dropped her gaze, and it was the first time Dan had ever seen her unsure of herself. He saw also that he had disliked her only because she so closely represented the things from which he had wanted to escape. Like Cleve Engel had represented the things he figured he had to have.

It didn't look quite the same, anymore, and he was glad that it didn't. He wanted to drive his own stakes down below here, to put a cabin on that knoll. And he wanted to put Polly in the cabin.

"Funny thing," said Dan. "Met a man on the Yreka trail looking for a piece like that. Man didn't know it then, but he figured he wanted to settle down."

Polly raised her eyes then, and they were truly joyous. "I like the man you met and brought back, Dan. He's a braver man than the one you left there. I welcome him to his home." There was that in her voice that was richer by far than what he had ever heard in the voice of another.

There was much more promise in her eyes than in all the gold in California.

TALES of the

by LEE

OLD CHARLIE

ONE NIGHT IN THE 1820'S A YOUNGSTER IN FADED SHIRT AND FRAYED TROUSERS SLIPPED FROM A NEW ENGLAND POORHOUSE AND DISAPPEARED INTO THE DARKNESS. LATER THE KID, GIVING THE NAME CHARLIE PANKHURST, GOT A JOB IN A WORCHESTER, MASS., LIVERY STABLE. A WILLING WORKER, GOOD WITH HORSES, THE NEW STABLE BOY WAS SOON DRIVING TEAMS AND FINALLY 6-HORSE COACHES.

BRINGING A PARTY HOME FROM A RURAL DANCE ON A BITTER WINTER NIGHT, THE HORSES TOOK THE BITS IN THEIR TEETH AND THE YOUNG "WHIP'S" NUMB FINGERS COULDN'T HOLD THEM. BUT FOR AID FROM GENTLEMEN ON THE BOX CHARLIE WOULD HAVE HAD A BAD RUNAWAY. THAT NEVER HAPPENED AGAIN.



THE KID GREW INTO A TALL, BROAD-SHOULDERED FELLOW WITH DEFT FINGERS AND WRISTS OF STEEL, AND WHEN BIRCH & STEVENS OPENED STAGE LINES IN CALIFORNIA HE WAS THE FIRST REINSMAN SENT FOR.

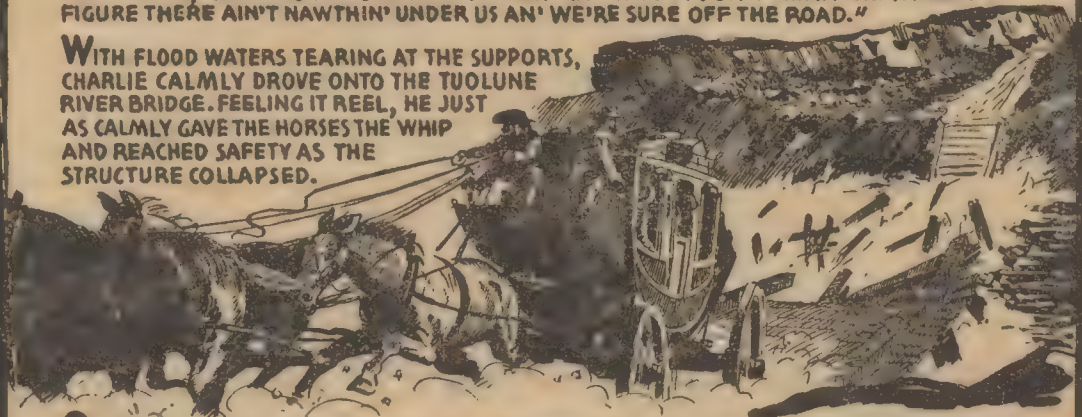
AN ARTIST AT FINGER-WORKING THE 6 "RIBBONS," EXPERT WITH WHIP AND BRAKE, CHARLIE SWUNG HIS LUMBERING STAGECOACH LOADED WITH PASSENGERS AND EXPRESS THROUGH CROWDED MINING CAMPS, OVER DIZZY MOUNTAIN TRAILS OF THE HIGH SIERRAS, THROUGH DANGEROUS INDIAN COUNTRY--ALWAYS WITH A FLOURISH.



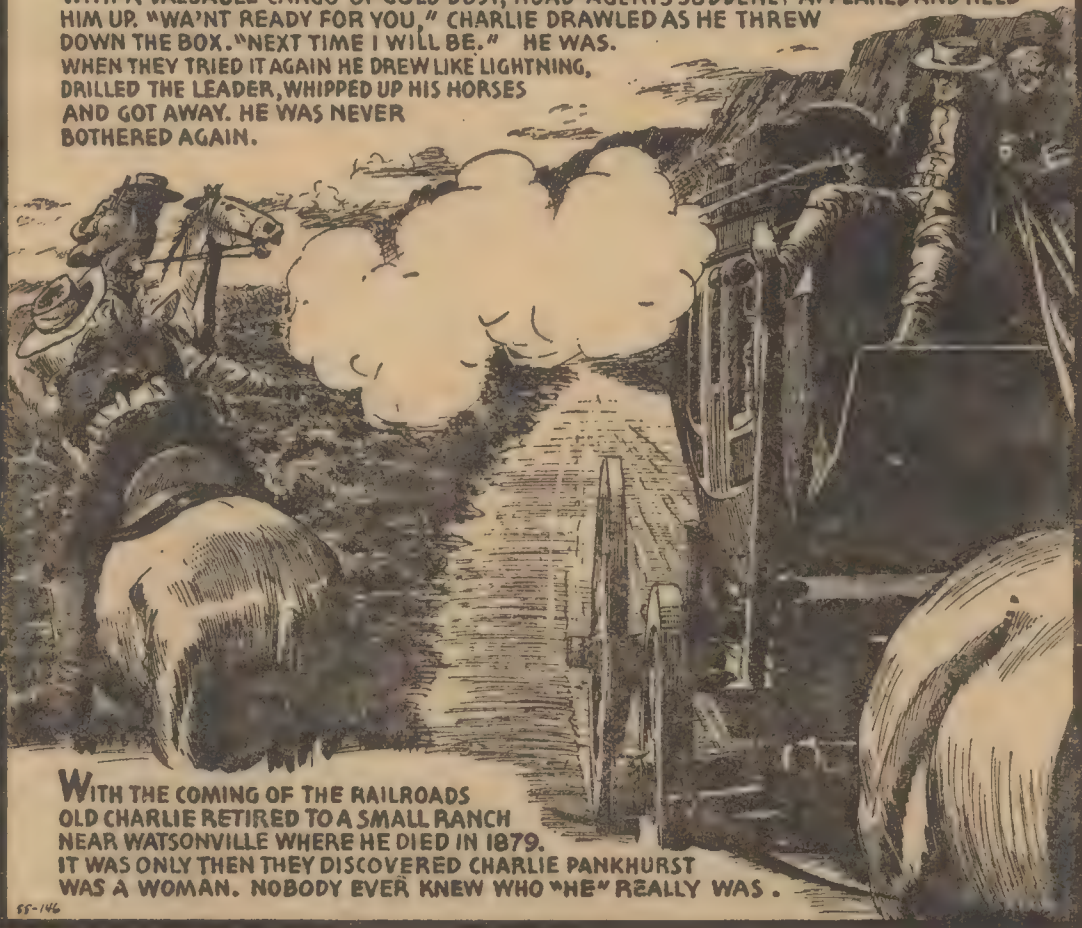
OLD WEST

"DON'T WORRY, PARDNER," THEY SAY HE TOLD A FRIGHTENED TENDERFOOT IN A SWIRLING DUST STORM, "WHEN I CAN'T SEE I KIN SMELL. AN' WHEN I DON'T HEAR THE WHEELS I FIGURE THERE AIN'T NAWTHIN' UNDER US AN' WE'RE SURE OFF THE ROAD."

WITH FLOOD WATERS TEARING AT THE SUPPORTS, CHARLIE CALMLY DROVE ONTO THE TUOLUNE RIVER BRIDGE. FEELING IT REEL, HE JUST AS CALMLY GAVE THE HORSES THE WHIP AND REACHED SAFETY AS THE STRUCTURE COLLAPSED.



QUIET, A DEAD SHOT WITH A .44, CHARLIE PANKHURST DIDN'T GO IN FOR ROISTERING AND GUNPLAY BUT DEVOTED HIMSELF TO HIS HORSES AND DRIVING. SPANKING ALONG WITH A VALUABLE CARGO OF GOLD DUST, ROAD-AGENTS SUDDENLY APPEARED AND HELD HIM UP. "WA'NT READY FOR YOU," CHARLIE DRAWLED AS HE THREW DOWN THE BOX. "NEXT TIME I WILL BE." HE WAS. WHEN THEY TRIED IT AGAIN HE DREW LIKE LIGHTNING, DRILLED THE LEADER, WHIPPED UP HIS HORSES AND GOT AWAY. HE WAS NEVER BOTHERED AGAIN.



WITH THE COMING OF THE RAILROADS OLD CHARLIE RETIRED TO A SMALL RANCH NEAR WATSONVILLE WHERE HE DIED IN 1879. IT WAS ONLY THEN THEY DISCOVERED CHARLIE PANKHURST WAS A WOMAN. NOBODY EVER KNEW WHO "HE" REALLY WAS.

Billy the Kid poked his shortgun muzzle
into the protruding stomach of the tender-
foot. . . .



BADLANDS BUSTER

*Fifth of
Nine Parts*

CHAPTER FIVE

Trailing Stolen Herds

*Charlie Siringo, Jingle-Bob
Joe and Billy the Kid agreed
on one thing: live and let live
—until you ride west of the
Pecos!*

THE night of the round-up, saddle ponies were brought and saddled; and scores of cowboys led by Bill Moore raced to meet the coming flames. Fifteen miles away they met cattle and wild creatures running from the fire. Big steers were shot down, carcasses were

By **RAYMOND S. SPEARS**

cut open, and cowboys, two to each carcass, roped each hind leg and drove their frantic horses to the creeping conflagration, dragging the beef animal along the flaming line of grass. The long sword of flame was smudged out, except here and there for a tuft of taller grass or dead browse. Those bits of "hell-fire" were set upon by boys and men on foot, the less skilled and enduring, who beat down the small fires with spreads of limp green hide and blankets wet in patches of alkali spring-thaw water.

No grub wagon followed the fire-fighters. They caught the fire where it slowed down at midnight and beat it down before the day-wind came in the morning. They slashed meat from the skinned carcasses and broiled it over thicket fires, and ate it salted only with the ashes. They whipped the fire and rode back to camp, "smoky, dirty, tired and hungry." And a few days later half the crew deserted, driven by excitement rumors over in Arizona and New Mexico—some stealing their mounts to make faster time. The runaways thought a party of government Star-route mail surveyors were Texas rangers looking for wanted fugitives.

The first roundup in the Texas Panhandle was to sort out the lost cattle of dozens of brands and there were scores of mess wagons, hundreds of cowboys. Cattle from the north drifted before winter storms into the southern territory and the stock jammed up against obstructions here and there down the line. The outfit bossed by Bill Moore, in which Siringo rode, had more acres and cattle than they could handle, and after animals had run wild all winter they were too hard to manage. Moore decided to close herd during the summer, getting the animals used to being managed. Accordingly he advanced Charlie Siringo, giving him an outfit of a wagon, cook, four riders and 2500 head of cattle to run for the summer.

Siringo was twenty-four years of age. Under the shrewd competence of the manager of herds over a million acres of pasture, Siringo had been recognized as capable of running a fortune in live stock. His youthful exuberance had become manageable. Moore told him to drift his herd across the summer pasture, toning them down from the winter freedom to quietened grass-fattened beef, ready to sell in the autumn. Within three months Siringo was put in charge of three other herds as well as his own.

Great numbers of cattle drifted southward before the winter storms. Thus a percentage of the beef that went north in the long drives now were going south and disappearing. Bill Brown had sent Charlie Siringo to find out what became of those lost animals. Siringo had lived among the Comanches and searched for the lost cattle. He found that the Indians were getting only a small number of the strays. They were growing hungry on the diminishing hosts of buffalo. The lost herds simply vanished.

Siringo may have or may not have seen part of the truth. When those animals went south wearing brands from herds above Dodge City in Kansas, as well as from the far-spread LX pasture, what became of them? Bill Brown was too good a cowman, too thoroughly familiar with the ways of cattle as well as mankind, not to recognize the subtle work of rustlers, of thieves of the cattle land. He outfitted Charlie Siringo for another search through the country from eastern New Mexico, across the Staked Plains into the Texas Panhandle. The great cattle boss told Siringo to find those cattle.

And so Charlie Siringo rode with a wagon outfit down the south of the great pasture. Perhaps there was no larger detective assignment ever given a cowboy. It meant trying to find cows in a land where every one helped himself to living domestic stock as occasion offered.

Cattle rustlers picked up those strays—and they didn't steal for the fun of it (though they enjoyed the wild adventures), and they had to sell the stolen goods. The buyers didn't keep the herds grazing the pastures. It was Siringo's job to find where the cows went. The thieves and the buyers of stolen goods were killers.

Perhaps there was no job in all the west as dangerous as Siringo's. Nevertheless, he took it on with alacrity.

IN 1878, with the Indians subdued and the buffalo herds nearly exterminated, devastating hordes of cattle were spreading over the vast prairie pastures from below the Rio Grande to the green timber lines in Canada. Tascosa was one of the cattle centers, on the bank of the Canadian river in the Texas Panhandle.

Tascosa (originally Atascosa) became the cowtown of the time and place. The patronage was passing trail outfits, fugitive riders, wandering cattlemen, buffalo hunters trying to find what had become of the vast, wild herds whose bones they had left from Canada prairies down to inland Mexico. A few years later, those same men were picking up the bones to sell to buyers of sugar refineries where they were used to purify and clarify granulated products.

Tascosa's liquor joints, brothels, gambling dens, stores and small population were housed in 'dobe shacks. Business boomed. And Bill Brown, superintendent of the LX brand wind-blown herds, saw too many head gone.

At this time, 1878, a youth of nineteen years was achieving notoriety as a killer: William Bonney, alias William Antrim, mostly known as Billy the Kid—born in New York city on November 23, 1859. In 1862 his parents moved to Coffeetown, Kansas, where the father died. His comely widow married a man named Antrim in Colorado territory: she opened a board-

ing house in Santa Fe and her first boarder was Ash Upson. The boy Billy was then about five years old.

This lad, like great numbers of frontier youngsters, matured early; he was blue-eyed, precocious, bright in school. Ash Upson, a newspaper man, taught the youngster. After a time, the Antrims, Billy Bonney and Ash Upson grew restless, and were lured to Silver City, in southwestern New Mexico. They had another boarding house which sheltered and fed women and men, mine camp citizenry. Gamblers taught the precocious lad many tricks of their trade and he was expert before he was ten years of age. Gunmen taught him to shoot straight and fast in the methods that were developed by Quantrell's raiders during the Civil War.

At twelve years of age (the youth told Siringo in 1878), he killed "a black nigger" who cheated in gambling at Ft. Union. Home again in Silver City, the boy heard a tough blacksmith make an insulting remark about his mother, who was passing by. Thereupon William Bonney stabbed the blacksmith three times, killing him. Billy was then twelve years of age—a killer of two men.

Presently the boy, a fugitive murderer, became known as Billy the Kid, and in 1878, at nineteen, he was leader of a band of riders who roamed through the Indian Territory, New Mexico, west Texas. "living on the country." They came riding to Tascosa.

Charlie Siringo had been sent by the LX outfit to Chicago with a train load of beef animals, four hundred head. Siringo punched and prodded them up a loading chute aboard the cattle cars, and Charlie with his two helpers worked the shipment, keeping the animals on their legs and feeding them for two days at Burlington, Iowa. A sleet storm came as the train pulled out and Siringo swung aboard, climbed to the running-board and ran towards the comfortable caboose.

Running on sleet-covered boards with cowboy high-heeled boots was a problem, and as he started to jump the chasm between two cattle cars he slipped, fell, and in going down, gripped the edge of the board walk. Otherwise he would have pitched head first between the cars to the tracks—but he was saved for further jeopardies.

In Chicago, Siringo took care of the cattle, under the eye of the cattle company partner, David T. Beals. This done, he searched out the far-known pleasures provided for visitors from the big pastures. He went out with two hundred dollars in his pocket, and over-night spent it all in the way of innumerable visitors through the gay light districts. After some sleep, he went prowling by day and the sign of Dr. Bruer, a dentist, reminded him of some work he needed done to his teeth.

"Fill them with gold!" he told the doctor, and kept the work going for hours. When he was to pay for the job, he didn't have a cent in his pocket. Too bad! He'd have to come back and pay the forty-five dollars—the dentist backed up, for Charley had his big scabbarded revolver and a sheathed bowie knife on his belt. He records, "In those days the filling had to be done by hand. The doctor used the punch and the young lady the mallet. They didn't stop for lunch."

The morning after, when Charlie had obtained more money from his employer, the dentist and the secretary-assistant were astonished and delighted when the lithe, swaggering cowboy returned and paid. All through his years, Charley was like that, impetuous and impulsive, and gradually he "squared up" to the best standards that prevailed in that period of astonishing violence, outlawry, and words that were often literally as good as bonds. "I was an easy mark," Siringo observes. Going back to the big pasture, Beal refused to give Charlie money for a blind

man who left a slip of pathetic poetry on the seats of the train. Charlie handed the beggar his last currency from his pocket, and Beals told him the blind man lived in "one of the swell residences of Chicago."

The old cuss was wealthy. And Charlie cussed himself instead of Mr. Beals.

BACK in Tascosa, at the outlying LX headquarters, "A crowd of strangers was playing cards under a cottonwood tree nearby. The cook informed me that they were Billy the Kid and his Lincoln County, New Mexico, warriors. When the cook rang the supper bell, I found myself seated at the side of good-natured 'Billy the Kid.' Henry Brown, Fred Waite and Tom O'Phalliard were among the others."

Smoking Havana cigars Charlie had brought from Chicago, the crowd sat around, talking. Charlie had a ten dollar meerschaum cigar holder that struck the fancy of Billy the Kid, and so Charley gave the notorious youth of nineteen years the pretty bauble. Billy gave Charlie a "finely bound novel which he had just finished reading. In it he wrote his autograph and the date." And so for weeks the two became chummy, trading information.

Billy the Kid's band had driven a band of stolen ponies from Seven Rivers Indians in New Mexico. They were loafing from their labors, spending the money from the loot. They not only patronized Tascosa, but visited the ranches of the vicinity.

One of the large ranches near the LX was owned by a speculative citizen from Boston, Massachusetts, and learning that the notorious outlaw from New Mexico spent several days at his ranch, he gave orders not to entertain Billy the Kid and his awful gang ever again.

(To be continued)

THE LAST OWLHOOT



Johnny jerked the rifle roughly out of Dave's hand, keeping him covered with the six-gun.

SHOULDERS stiff and jaw muscles tight, Dave Kerrigan stood in the doorway of his lonely mountain cabin and watched the posse rideaway. He saw the men reach the crest of the ridge. Before dropping down, the sheriff turned

in the saddle and lifted a hand in a friendly gesture of farewell. Then the riders were lost from view, although their horses could still be heard running on the loose stones. Then that too was gone.

Lost and alone, Dave Kerrigan still

By WALLACE UMPHREY

If you run from it far enough, you can sometimes catch up again with your past, Johnny found—and even with the bullet that has your name on it!

continued to stand there. Emptiness possessed him wholly. Darkness flowed swiftly over the mountain peaks and enfolded in its embrace the valley he had grown to love.

The silence seemed so intense that it hurt his ears. A chill wind ripped suddenly down from the cold peaks. Dave shivered, but only part of his trembling was due to the chill; the rest was buried in the memory of things he had thought gone forever.

Now Dave realized that he'd only been kidding himself. There were things that couldn't be forgotten. How much did he owe Johnny, anyway?

Thick and liquid, the darkness ran along the ground. Swiftly it touched the peeled poles of the big corral which held the thirty horses he had caught and tamed. The horses were quiet now, bunched head-down against the encroaching night.

To Dave they represented a dream. The sale of them to Major Waddell, the army remount buyer, would be another forward step in his new way of life. The money he got for them, added to what he had already saved in the Truscott bank, would give him the security he needed. It was all honest money. He could build a wing on the cabin and there would be no reason left for Liz Shelby to refuse to marry him.

From the safety of the pines above the little horse ranch, a painter cried out. The cry shattered the stillness. Quickly the heads of the horses came around to face the sound.

"I'll have to get that cat," Dave said aloud.

It came to him that the only thing for him to do was to go about a normal routine. Perhaps Johnny Soper wouldn't find him here. Then Dave shook his head. Johnny had broken jail—and he'd find him, all right.

Nevertheless, Dave felt a little better. Things would work out and his own secret

would still remain buried in the past. Johnny would understand the importance of that.

Entering the cabin, Dave pulled the slab door shut behind him. Part of his empty feeling was gone now. He could get Johnny Soper to ride away without trouble and nobody here in the valley would be the wiser.

"DAVE," Sheriff Shelby had said, "a gent named Johnny Soper has broke out of Deer Lodge. He may head this way. You seen any strangers hereabouts?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Dave had only shaken his dark head.

"The Saddlebacks here are a good country for him to try to hide out in," the old sheriff observed. "Well, I aim to ketch him before he causes trouble."

"Hope so," Dave managed.

The sheriff nodded. "Maybe he won't show up at all. Still, I can't be too careful. He kilt a guard breakin' out of jail. I reckon he's got the loot from that stage robbery hid out somewheres. It beats all what happened to it. One thing you can say for Johnny Soper—he never squealed on that outlaw pard of his, the one that got away."

Dave felt a trickle of sweat down his back.

"It was kind of funny the way things worked out," Sheriff Shelby said. "You ever hear about it, Dave?"

"No," Dave lied.

"Well, this here outlaw bunch held up the stage and got away with the strong box," the sheriff told him idly. "There was three of 'em in on it, and nobody got hurt in the robbery. But later on, from the way things looked, these three outlaws got in a fight over the loot. One of 'em shot the other two, but got kilt himself in the ruckus. When the law stepped in, they found a dead man and this Johnny Soper bleedin' like a stuck pig. The third

member of the gang got plumb away."

"You're sure there were three out-laws?" Dave asked.

"That's the story, Dave," The sheriff lifted his reins. "You comin' in town tomorrow to see Major Waddell?"

"I aim to."

"Liz has been askin' about you. Why not come out to the place for dinner? Jawn Clemmons is comin'. He'll be workin' real late at the bank tonight, gettin' out the annual report. Likely he'll be so sleepy at dinner it'll be like you and Liz was alone."

The sheriff and his posse had ridden away . . .

Now the painter wailed again, a little closer this time. Out in the pole corral the horses snorted crazily and pawed the ground. "I reckon I'd better go after that cat right now," Dave told himself.

He took down a Winchester from a deer horn rest and then found a lantern. The horses out in the corral were striking their feet hard against the packed earth. Major Waddell, Dave knew, would buy them all quick as a wink. Dave had a way with horses and he had done a good job soft-breaking them.

Picking up the lantern and the Winchester, Dave crossed to the door. When he pulled it open, he found himself face to face with a man who was just mounting the porch.

"Hullo, Dave," the man said. "You always greet an old pard with a rifle in your hands?"

"Johnny," Dave said. "Johnny Soper."

He was a little startled. Not because Johnny was here, but because he hadn't heard Johnny's horse ride up. His surprise held him motionless; he neither stepped aside nor lifted the Winchester out of the crook of his arm.

"Well, Dave, ain't you glad to see me?" Johnny Soper laughed grimly. "I'm kind of tired. How about askin' me in?"

There was a challenge in his voice, in

his stance, in his whole attitude. Without replying Dave stepped aside. Johnny swaggered forward and came to a sudden halt at Dave's side. One of his hands, which had been hidden, came into view. A six-gun in it pressed against Dave's ribs.

"Put down that rifle, Dave," Johnny ordered roughly. "I ain't sure which way you're ready to jump."

"You know I wouldn't shoot you," Dave told him.

"Wouldn't you?" Johnny jerked the rifle roughly out of Dave's hands and moved into the cabin, keeping Dave covered by the six-gun in his hand. "We was always pretty wild," he said over his shoulder. "You and me and Yancey Newbold. But we drew the line at killin'. Them were good times, weren't they?" His eyes became dark and sullen, and his lips twisted. "Them were good times till Yancey got greedy and decided he wanted all the money for himself."

Dave shook his head. They hadn't been good times at all—he knew that now. The three of them hadn't done much harm until they had robbed the stage. Dave still remembered the terrible look that had come into Yancey's eyes at the sight of the money. It was the kind of look he never wanted to see again. No, they hadn't been good times at all. All along they had had the wrong slant on things. Dave was twenty-four now, and he knew.

"I owe you somethin, Johnny," Dave said. "When you killed Yancey, you saved my life. And you never squealed on me when you went to the pen. I owe you something, but I can't figure out exactly how much."

"You still got the money?"

Dave let his glance flicker toward the bed. "It's all yours, Johnny. Every penny. I don't want it. That ought to make us about even."

Johnny Soper threw back his head and laughed. He was a tall, thin, tow-headed

man about Dave's own age. He had always had a sort of devil-may-care attitude toward life. In the past he had talked of the excitement of the owlhoot trail, his blue eyes sparkling. Now he seemed changed somehow, although Dave couldn't figure out what was different. Four years in the penitentiary seemed to have hardened Johnny's face.

"So you're going straight now, Dave," he commented. "You just forgot about the past and that was all there was to it."

Dave nodded. "About like that."

"Well, it won't work."

"Why not?"

"Because your past catches up with you," Johnny said, with a hard anger in his tone. "Like here. Like now."

Dave fingered the scar along his jaw. It was a constant reminder of the injury he himself had got when Yancey Newbold had tried to kill him. Yancey had shot Johnny and then turned his gun on Dave, but Johnny wasn't dead and he had managed to kill Yancey before Dave was finished off. Dave had escaped with the money before the law had stepped in.

"The sheriff was here lookin' for you," Dave said. "I'll hide you out till mornin'. Tomorrow you can ride away with the money."

"And then you'll keep on goin' straight?"

"Sure."

Johnny shook his head. "I got to watch my backtrail now. I killed a guard when I broke jail. I'll never get me a chance to go straight now. You wouldn't want to throw in with me again, would you?"

A coldness touched Dave. "Not a chance."

Johnny shrugged. "We'll talk about it later. I'm hungry now, Dave. How about rustlin' up some grub?"

Dave poked up the fire. He tried telling himself that everything would be all right. Johnny Soper would ride away with the money and nobody here in the valley

would ever learn about Dave's past. Everyone had always accepted him. He had worked hard and kept his mouth shut and nobody had questioned him.

"What's the matter with them horses?" Johnny asked.

"A painter up in the hills has been soundin' off. I got to get him. He's a real danger to them horses."

"You know something, Dave?" Johnny asked almost wistfully. "I kinda feel sorry for that big cat."

DAVE was bent over the stove. His gaze turned suddenly toward the framed tintype of Liz Shelby on a little shelf above his bed. And he remembered vividly how it had been that time four years ago when he had ridden crazily into the valley with the hurt and the shock of the bullet wound hard upon him.

Days had passed and Liz Shelby had nursed him back to health. When he was well again, he had worked as a hired man on the sheriff's little ranch farther down the valley. Finally he had acquired a small stake which enabled him to branch out for himself. Nobody had ever suspected the truth.

"Nice lookin' woman," Johnny commented.

Flushing uncomfortably, Dave jerked his eyes away from the framed tintype.

"I know the signs, Dave," Johnny said banteringly. "You'd like to marry her, huh? Well, why ain't you asked her?"

"I have."

Johnny laughed. "So she puts you off. You told her yet about your past?"

Dave shook his head. "You think I'd tell her about that? I'm tryin' to forget my past. She'll marry me when I get enough of a stake put aside." Bitterness came into his voice. "I was doin' all right with forgettin' till you showed up."

There was faint derision in Johnny's tone. "Dave, ain't you learned yet that a man gets only what he can take?"

They ate. Guardedly, Dave watched Johnny Soper. Johnny was eating swiftly, his six-gun at his elbow. It came to Dave slowly that Johnny had changed a great deal. The devil-may-care attitude was gone; no longer was he full of easy laughter. Now he seemed hard and vicious. Dave shook his head.

Afterwards Dave cleared up the dishes. Johnny made no offer to help, sitting there with the six-gun lying at his fingertips. The feeling of friendship which had been with them in the past was gone. Dave found himself wondering why Liz Shelby had always found some excuse to turn him down. Well, after the sale of his horses to Major Waddell, he'd have enough money. She'd accept him then, all right.

After things were cleaned up, Dave pulled out a pair of dirty saddlebags from under the bed.

"Here's the money," he said. "I ain't touched a penny of it. It's all yours if you'll ride away tomorrow."

Having the money around had bothered Dave; he'd be glad to get rid of it. Squatting there on his heels, he heard Johnny suck in his breath. Dave turned his eyes upward.

Johnny was standing spread-legged over him. Dave felt himself stiffen. In Johnny's eyes was the same deadly, terrible look that had been in Yancey Newbold's eyes that time four years ago.

Johnny said softly. "How come you never turned in the money to the law?"

Dave frowned. "I couldn't turn it in without tellin' my whole story. And besides, I figured I might need the money sometime to bargain with."

Johnny shook his head. "It looks to me, Dave, like you ain't in no position to bargain."

Dave's face got white. "Huh?"

"It's like this," Johnny explained triumphantly. "You're afraid your past will catch up with you. Me, I ain't afraid of

anything any more. I'm on the dodge and someday the law will get me. I ain't got no future. But you, Dave, you got a big future all planned out in your mind. And so you're scared to death somethin' will come up to spoil it."

Dave whispered. "You ain't gonna spoil it for me, Johnny. Tell me you don't mean that."

Johnny laughed harshly. "You won't throw in with me, Dave. Okay. And I don't blame you none—I ain't a safe bet. I've killed a couple of men and you ain't. But I aim to live high till some jigger with a badge cuts me down." His eyes thinned down. "I heard there's a wad of money down in the Truscott bank."

"I reckon," Dave said guardedly.

"Okay," Johnny said softly. "I'll be leavin' here tonight."

Elation filled Dave's mind. This was even better than he had hoped. Johnny was grinning lazily.

"But before I ride away, Dave," he said, "you're gonna help me with one more job. We'll crack that bank together—I can't do it alone. And then I'll ride away and never bother you again."

"There's enough money in them saddlebags for you."

"Is there ever enough money, Dave? I aim to ride down into Mexico and buy me a ranch. Maybe I'll get away with it."

"You can't do it!" Dave cried. "Clemmons is workin' late tonight."

"Clemmons?"

"The banker."

"That's even better," Johnny said lazily. "It'll make the job easier."

Anger filled Dave completely. In three strides he was at Johnny's side. Johnny made a grab for the gun lying on the table, and Dave kicked it out of his hand. The gun went spinning across the floor. Johnny cursed and then Dave was on him.

They fought silently. Dave was in a wild panic. A blow on the jaw sent Johnny stumbling backward. His feet slid out

from under him and he landed heavily on his back. Dave snatched up the gun and then dropped to his knees on Johnny's chest.

Except for their hoarse breathing, everything was quiet. Dave knelt there, aiming the gun at Johnny's head. Moments passed. Desperately Dave wanted to shoot, but he couldn't find it in himself to pull the trigger.

"You won't kill me, Dave," Johnny said derisively. "You've always been kind of weak and spineless. It ain't in you."

Dave felt suddenly drained. Rocking back on his heels, he allowed Johnny to sit up.

"I couldn't do it," he whispered. "Johnny, you saved my life once. Besides, I just can't take a man's life. But I ain't gonna help you rob the bank!"

Johnny took the gun. "You'll help, all right. There ain't no way you can get out of it. I got your number, Dave. You'll do anything to keep folks from learnin' about your past."

"If I help rob the bank, they'll know it."

"We'll figure somethin'," Johnny told him roughly. "You might as well try to get what you want out of life, if it don't hurt me any. I don't know why I give a damn what happens to you. Well, let's go."

They saddled up and headed down the rocky trail toward town. The moon was bright. Dave tried to keep his mind blank. There was only one chance in a thousand that Dave's part in this would remain a secret. Yet Dave was clutching at that one chance.

At the edge of town they left the road and came up behind the bank from the rear. Here in the shadows they dismounted. Muffled sounds came from the two saloons, but the street was deserted. Light spilled from the bank windows at the front.

Johnny touched Dave's arm. In the darkness his eyes glittered brightly.

"Here's how we'll work it," he whispered. "The banker knows you. You get him to let you in. Talk to him, but make sure he doesn't lock the door. I'll come right in afterwards and hold him up."

"How'll I keep him from lockin' the door?"

"That's your business. And keep your eyes open. If he's got a gun handy, try to push it outa his reach."

Dave still felt empty. "The whole town's gonna know my part in this."

"Maybe not, Dave." Johnny's voice was urgent. "Tell 'em all I made you do it. They'll understand that. Even though they suspect you, there won't be real proof. Don't try to cross me, or I'll let the whole town know about you!"

SLOWLY Dave walked around to the front of the bank. The threat Johnny held over his head enveloped him completely. He'd rather be dead than have the truth known. At the front of the bank he hesitated briefly. The blinds were pulled down, but light shone from beneath them. Dave rattled the door.

"Who is it?" Clemmons called out.

"Dave Kerrigan," Dave said. "I want to talk to you a minute."

"Sure, Dave. Just a second."

The sound of movement came from inside. Dave asked himself how much he owed Johnny. And then he knew he wasn't doing this for Johnny Soper. He was doing it because Dave Kerrigan wanted to marry Liz Shelby and live here in the valley the rest of his life. Dave knew he didn't owe Johnny anything.

"Come in, Dave," Clemmons said, pulling open the door. "What's on your mind?"

Vainly Dave tried to think of some excuse. He hesitated on the threshold, blocking the closing of the door. Banker Clemmons, a fat, white-haired man, stepped back, and Dave caught the door as it started to ease shut. Gently he let it

close. His ears told him that the snap lock hadn't caught.

"Is it locked?" Clemmons asked.

Dave nodded. At the back of the bank he could see the vault, the big iron door ajar. Clemmons went back behind the grille where he had been working. There was a gun lying on the counter at his elbow.

"What's on your mind, Dave?" Clemmons asked again.

Dave hesitated, trying to think of something to say. A faintly puzzled look came into the banker's eyes.

Then Johnny Soper was speaking.

"Both of you!" he said viciously. "Get around here where I can see you."

The banker was startled; he flicked a quick look at Dave before complying. Dave's face was white and strained. Shaking his head, Clemmons came slowly around the counter to Dave's side.

Dave stared at Johnny. Johnny's face was set in grim and deadly lines.

Into Dave's mind came the memory of the big painter that was a threat to his horses. The big cat was their enemy and it should be killed: the horses recognized the painter for what it was.

Johnny was no different from the cat.

Decision came into Dave's eyes. Behind him, on the counter, was the gun.

And Johnny must have seen the look of decision. As Dave spun around and made a wild grab for the gun, Johnny fired. A sledgehammer blow caught Dave in the side and he felt himself falling. Staggering, he gripped the gun in his hand and started to turn. Again Johnny's gun flamed; Dave felt himself slipping toward the floor. He rolled over and snapped a hurried shot at Johnny. The slug took Johnny in his gun arm; his weapon flew out of his hand.

He ran outside. Dave was unable to move, paralyzed by shock. From a long way off he heard the sound of shouting. Then from outside somewhere there came a wild burst of shots. Dave passed out.

When he awoke, the sheriff was kneeling beside him.

"Take it easy, Dave," Sheriff Shelby said. "The doctor's on his way. We got Johnny Soper."

Dave closed his eyes. His secret was still safe.

The sheriff was speaking heavily. "Johnny Soper tried to force you to help him rob the bank. Ain't that the way of it?"

Dave started to nod. And then, suddenly, the truth was there. He knew now why Liz Shelby had put him off. And he knew she would always put him off, any time he asked her to marry him. Because a man couldn't make his past all right by simply hiding it. It was always with him, like a shadow. Liz Shelby could always see it there in his eyes, and she could never trust him for that reason.

"Ain't that the way of it?"

"No," Dave said, and explained everything, from the beginning.

The sheriff's voice was suddenly hearty. "Mighty glad you got that off your chest, Dave. Me and Liz, we've knowed it for a long time. You talked some when you was out of your head that time four years ago when she was nursin' you."

"Why didn't you arrest me?"

"I've always reckoned it's what a feller is and not what he was that counts. I been watchin' you close, hopin' you'd find yourself. Well, I guess you did just now. Besides, I wanted to find that money you fellers stole." The sheriff grinned. "Liz has been waitin' a long time for you to unburden your mind."

The doctor came in and looked Dave over. Sheriff Shelby said that it would be like old times, with Liz nursing Dave back to health. Willing hands lifted Dave. They carried him outside and he saw the dead body of Johnny Soper lying on the walk. Unaccountably Dave thought again of that painter back in the hills.

"I'll have to get that cat," he said aloud.

COLT SIZE

By RAY TOWNSEND



He saw Jim stagger and fall as the bullet spat out.

“JIM?”

Giles rolled over in the velvet blackness of the night. He waited, counting the seconds as the silence remained unbroken below. He was not put out by the shortness of his older brother's tone. A moment later he said, “Think Uncle Lew made it, Jim? You don't think the bandits caught him, do you?”

“What good's thinkin' do?” Jim's voice was tired. “Go to sleep, kid. One of us ought to sleep.”

“Yeah. G'night, Jim.”

●

He was a boy in a man's game, and two lives depended on his play. Should he side his gunfast brother—or the sheriff who was out for his life!

"Night, kid."

But Giles couldn't sleep. From far below, from beyond the mouth of the canyon itself, there was the sound of a lone coyote, dismal and somehow ominous in spite of its familiarity. He tried to sleep, shifting for a better position upon the uneven hardness of the rocky ledge. But it was no use. He kept thinking about Jim and his uncle Lew, and the whole thing was too good for sleep.

Too good, even in spite of the unseen but vividly imagined gang of border desperadoes and Mexican cutthroats who had chased the three of them, pinning them here in the canyon, black-walled in the inky night. And the feeling of goodness, Giles knew, came from his being here with Big Jim Markham, his older brother, whom Giles had not seen since before he could remember. He'd known him, though, Giles had, that same afternoon when Jim and Uncle Lew had ridden into the yard before the shanty Giles knew as home. Pa had taken the mules and wagon and gone to town on his monthly trip for supplies and wouldn't be back for two days. But Giles had known his brother, almost instinctively it seemed, as the two men had got down from the beat, lathered sorrel they'd been doubling on.

Things had happened so fast, though, that Giles hadn't rightly got in a word edgewise before they were running, Giles himself leading as they fled along the creek bottom toward the hills to wind up here in the canyon after dark. And there was so much he wanted to know.

Of course, he'd always known that Jim and Uncle Lew were very rich down there in Mexico. But when Lew had rushed into the shanty half an hour after they'd got there, yelling at Jim that the bandits who'd been trailing them were coming, Giles had thought that this was pretty far north for border desperadoes, no matter how much money Jim and his uncle might be carrying.

But the thought had disappeared in the brief argument between the men as to whether or not Giles was to come along. Giles had wanted to come, to be with his brother. And even now, here in the night, Giles frowned as he remembered that it was Jim himself who had been against his coming along. But there'd been little time and his uncle had not given in. The horse the two men had ridden was done for and Giles had eagerly volunteered to show the way along the bottoms.

But now, sleep fleeing as he remembered all the things Pa had told him about his big brother, Giles stirred again on the rock-hard ledge of the canyon wall and said, "Tell me about Mexico, Jim. What was it like down there? Really."

There was a scraping sound in the darkness as Jim shifted on the ledge. "Why don't you sleep, kid?"

"Can't, Jim. Tell me."

"There ain't much to tell, kid." Jim's voice was reluctant. "About the same as here. Rocky hills and mesquite and buckbrush."

"The ranch, I mean. Did you have thousands and thousands of cattle? And a big white 'dobe ranch house with lots of peons to wait on you? And pretty *señoritas* with tall combs and shawls and other peons playing guitars and lots of *tequila* to drink? Did you Jim?"

There was a quiet laugh in the dark and Giles felt his face grow warm, thinking maybe he'd said too much.

"You sure been having pipe dreams, kid? Where you been gettin' that stuff? Pa didn't tell you that, did he?"

And still Giles felt the warmth of his face. "Not exactly," he said slowly. "But I seen the letters you wrote Pa. Mexican stamps on them and everything. Gosh, Jim, I bet it sure is swell down there, huh? Can I have my own bronc when we get there? And silver spurs and a saddle all trimmed with conchos and everything?"

There was no laugh this time. Giles heard the man shift again, uneasily, in the dark. "I sure wish you could get some sleep, kid."

But suddenly there was a sound from below. Giles stiffened, feeling, too, the abrupt alertness of the man beside him. There was a second sound, closer, as of a booted sole scraping on rock. The brief, quiet whistle came then and Giles relaxed. A moment later a man's labored breathing was there as Lew lifted himself up on the ledge. Giles could see his outline as it blacked out a single, distant star.

"What's up, Lew?" Jim's voice was quiet.

Lew's voice was heavier than Jim's, sounding older and more full-bodied. It was not the voice of an easy man. "What the hell you think? They're camped around the mouth of the canyon like flies on a dead steer. When it starts to get light—"

"Shut up, Lew!"

"Shut up? Sure, you can keep shut all you want because of the kid here, but what about when the sun starts to show? He's in the same spot we're in and it won't make no difference."

"I said shut up!"

There was a cold steeliness in Jim's voice Giles hadn't heard before. The other man was quiet, only the quickness of his breathing sounding in the darkness. Giles frowned to himself, sensing the discord between his brother and Lew. There were many things he did not know, he felt. But the quiet wasn't good and after a minute he spoke.

"I used to play up here in the canyon when I was little. There was an old mine. Right over there on the other side. And a tunnel run back in the cliff and there were cables and—"

"A tunnel?" Lew's deep voice demanded. "Well, for Pete's sake, boy, why didn't you say so? Letting us sit up here on this damned ledge when there's a hole

handy! You think you could find that mine in the dark?"

"I think so." This was better, much better. Giles felt suddenly important, wishing he'd remembered the mine before. But Jim spoke then and Giles listened, knowing that Jim was really the one who was important.

"Just a minute, kid. You say there were cables? What kind of cables?"

"Cables, hell!" Lew snorted. "In about two hours we're going to look like sittin' ducks on this damned ledge and you start harpin' about cables! Come on, let's start lookin' for that hole!"

"Shut up, Lew! What kind of cables, kid?"

"Listen, you're going to tell me to shut up once too often, Jim Markham!"

But Jim's voice was patient, ignoring the threat in the older man's tone. "What kind of cables, kid?"

GILES tried to remember how the cables had been, his memory faltering beneath the sudden apprehension he felt.

"Well," he hesitated, "the mine was right over there, about half way up the cliff. And there was a real long cable that came across this way. It was real high and went right to the top. And then there was another one that went down the cliff from the mine. It was busted, though."

"Went clear to the top, the first one?" Giles caught the excitement in his brother's voice. "Where to the top, kid? Somewhere over us, here?"

"I think so." Giles tried to remember how the canyon looked in the daytime. "Yes, it'd be just about over us. Only way up, on the rim."

"And what's up there? What's at the top?" Jim's husky whisper was openly excited now. "A housing of some kind? A windlass? Any more cable?"

"Say—" Lew's voice was suddenly wondering.

"Yes, that's it, Jim!" Giles remembered suddenly, wondering how Jim could have known. "The cable went up and two or three more cables went into the ground, holding it there. And there was a round drum with lots of other cable wrapped around it, and the end was hanging over the cliff. I remember because I climbed up there once, along the ridge on this side, from the mouth of the canyon. It's too steep here and you can't get up."

"Say, by hell, that's it!" Lew's voice cut in eagerly. "You say the end of that cable was hanging down this side? How far? Where?" Lew moved in the darkness, as though he were feeling for some sign of the cable along the vertical rock wall.

But Giles was suddenly dejected. "It just hung over a little way," he said. "It was busted, too."

But Jim's voice was confident and Giles felt his brother's hand on his arm. "What kind of a drum was the cable on, kid? Was it set up and anchored so you could unroll it?"

"Yes. Yes, it was," Giles said. "I never tried to unroll it, though. It looked real heavy and I was afraid it'd drag me over the cliff. It was rusty, too."

"And how did you say you got up there?"

"Well, instead of coming into the canyon like we did, you got to go up the ridge on this side. It's pretty steep, some places, but you can make it all right."

The darkness was quiet a long minute and Giles tried to figure what his brother was thinking. But Lew moved and said, "You go down the canyon and up the ridge with them hombres sittin' down there with enough artillery to outfit a regiment? Come on, we better start lookin' for that hole."

"Not yet, Lew." Jim paused. "I think there's a way."

Lew spat in the dark. "There ain't no way, hombre! I been down there! Say,

wait a minute!" His voice grew threatening now, lowering ominously. "If you got any ideas about sending the kid, forget it! You know as well as I do why we got him along! He's the last ace we got when the sun starts up! If he wasn't with us, them misters down there—"

"You ain't going yellow, are you, Lew?"

In the silence that followed Jim's quiet voice, Giles heard his uncle's quickly drawn breath. And here it was again, as it had been earlier; that nameless, prickly sensation about the hairs of his neck, the uneasy, hollow feeling in his stomach. He'd had it when Lew had rushed into the house hours before with the word that they were coming—the desperadoes who had trailed Jim and Lew all the way from the border. Giles had known then, though, that it was fear because they were coming; that if they ever caught up there would be shooting and death. This, now, was a thing between Jim and Lew. And Lew calling him, Giles, their last ace—Giles couldn't figure how he was helping things out much by just being along.

But now, after a long minute of heavy silence, Lew's answer came. "You'll answer to me for that if we get out of this, Jim Markham!"

Jim's voice, though, sounded like he hadn't even heard Lew. "Lettin' the kid go is the only chance we got, Lew," he said. "He's small. He might make it where one of us couldn't. And if they catch him—"

"Keep your trap shut! I'm telling you he's the only ace we got!"

"Heck, I bet I could get past easy, Jim. I been up here lots. They wouldn't even smell me," Giles said, to show Jim that he wasn't afraid.

For a minute Jim didn't say anything. "You're a good kid, Giles," he said then. "You think you could unroll that cable and let it down here so we could get up?"

"Sure I could, Jim."

"All right, kid. You know what to do. There's no use for me to tell you any more. If you can get that cable down here in time, me and Lew might make it out of this rat hole," Jim said.

"Sure, Jim! I'll make it!" Giles was suddenly eager. He scrambled for the edge, feeling his way, groping for a foothold as he went over the side. And then, from this different position, he could see the faint outlines of the two men against the rock. There was the glint of starshine on metal between them and Giles knew it was a gun. He swallowed and tried to keep his voice from wavering. "I'll whistle from the top, Jim."

"Yeah. Better hurry, kid. Going to start gettin' light pretty soon." Giles turned to go, but Jim spoke again. "Just one thing more, kid." He paused. "When you're snakin' past them hombres down there you want to make sure they don't hear you. But if you can catch anything they might say—"

Lew cursed, cutting off as though something had been jabbed suddenly into his middle.

"If you hear them talking, kid, it might be a good idea to listen."

"Yeah. Sure, Jim." Giles tried to cover the empty feeling that was growing again in his stomach. "I don't savvy that Mexican talk, but I'll listen."

Now Jim's voice was hardly above a whisper. "I want you to know, kid, that I'm sorry about a lot of things. Maybe some day you'll understand how it was. I guess I ain't been a very good brother to you, kid. Now get goin'. Beat it!"

Giles went, feeling his way down, ledge by ledge. Away from the canyon wall, along the boulder strewn bottom, it was a little lighter and he made better progress. Nearing the canyon's mouth he went down on hands and knees and, finally, to his belly, elbowing his way and taking advantage of every scrap of cover he could find.

THEN suddenly he heard the sound of muffled voices. He couldn't catch the words, but he wouldn't be able to understand anyway. He waited, crouching close behind the scraggling juniper. The voices were drawing closer now, still low, but coming on. Giles all but quit breathing, behind the bush.

And then, abruptly and without warning, reality struck home in his mind.

He couldn't believe it, dared not believe it, but it was there. The voice was not Mexican. It was speaking in English and more than that, in a familiar tone. It was the slightly nasal tone of County Sheriff Amos Winter, and before Giles could get a straight thought through the surprise in his mind his own father was talking—Pa, speaking mildly and with a worried note. But it was the sense of their words, more than the discovery of their identity, that brought the reality, that held Giles in the shadow in sudden, shattering disillusionment.

"But, Sheriff, surely you'll give me a chance to talk to them before you close in! They've got Giles with them, I'm sure of it! And Jim's my son, too, and Lew my brother! They're my blood, Sheriff! I can talk them down!"

"It's tough on you, Ben, I know that." The sheriff's voice was considerate. "But the first thing I aim to do the minute it gets light enough is to cover that old mine shaft from every angle in the canyon! For your sake, Ben, I wish Jim and that brother of yours had never come back across the border! They already had enough against them to send them up for life, from the jobs they pulled in the old days. But as long as they stayed in Mexico it was none of my affair."

"When they showed up again yesterday, though, and pulled this bank robbery, that made it my affair, Ben! And don't forget Jim and Lew killed two men in that robbery! It's too bad Jim went ahead and pulled this job without lettin' you

know he was back. Might be you could have talked him out of it, Ben. But they're killers, and I'm warning you I'm not making any deals whatsoever! I'm bringing Jim and Lew Markham in, Ben! Alive, if I can, but dead if I must!"

His father spoke again, and as they went on there was the sound of the sheriff's adamant voice. But Giles remained numb and alone and unhearing in the dark. Jim himself had told him to stop here, to listen. To hear that his brother was an outlaw, a killer, a man wanted dead or alive! But Jim had wanted him away, too, out of the reach of Lew. That was why Jim hadn't wanted him to come along in the first place. Why he'd had to hold a gun on Lew while Giles got away—that was what his uncle had meant when he'd talked about their only ace. Lew had meant to hold Giles as hostage while he made his deal with the law.

But Giles knew more than that, too. He had to get up on the rim and lower the cable.

The cable was old and rusty on its drum. Far beyond the valley and the thin, low line of mountains to the east, the damning threat of sun was preparing its verdict. Giles had already given his low whistle from the rim, heard the answer of its mate from below. But the drum would not turn—the spindle was rusted tight.

Desperation began to build in him. His fingers dripped blood from their hurried, clawing contact with the broken cable strands. Desperately he ran to the edge, drawing up the dangling end, carrying it back and looping it around the drum in an effort to free the necessary length. His throat was dry, and there was desperation in his backward glances towards the east.

But after two complete loops of the rust-stiffened cable about the drum, he saw that he had gained less than ten feet of length. It would never be enough.

Beyond the cable, he could see the figures of Jim and Lew on the ledge far be-

low. Abruptly he looked away, down the far run toward the mouth of the canyon. Were those men he saw? Giles cried out, "Jim!"

"It's all right, kid." The answer was soft from below, a final sound in the dawn. And as he stared downward Giles saw the casual salute, a wave of the hand from Jim, as though Jim Markham had read the cards and conceded the hand.

He swung on the winch then, assaulting the rust-fouled spindles at the ends of the drum with a heavy granite boulder. Tears blinded his sight as he hammered the dead iron. Pain stabbed up from knuckles and wrist. And then, soft in the muffling distant air, came the sound of a single gunshot. Giles froze, and futility and realization joined, and there was a sharp, cold chill in his spine.

As he stood there, staring at the winch, he realized suddenly that the rusted head of a half-inch pin he'd not seen before was protruding from the collar about the spindle. Without hope, almost without awareness he stepped closer and grasped the pin between bloody fingers and thumb. It came free. The drum turned, and stopped. He grasped the cable and pulled. It unwound.

Hastily then, in the sheer joy of action, he ran with the cable to the edge and fed it through his swinging hands.

The cable was down. He could see them grab for it. He ran back and threw a loop over the leg of the spindle, and when it caught he jockeyed the drum and dropped the pin home. It was down!

But he saw the posse then. Far below, but coming up along the canyon. Quick terror flooded Giles's mind.

And then, on the ledge, he saw it happen. Lew was holding the cable in one hand, and a gun in the other. And now his laughter came up, mean, deadly laughter.

He saw Jim stagger, there on the ledge,

(Continued on page 127)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 111)

HOWDY, pardner! Are you cowpuncher material? Or are you better suited to be a lamb herder? Anyhow, here's your chance to prove your case. Below are listed twenty questions about cowboys and the West in general. A darned good puncher can call the turn on eighteen or more of them correctly. A guy automatically lands in the lamb herder bracket, however, if he can't answer more than fourteen or fifteen. So try your hand at answering these Western brain twisters, pardner . . . and find out where you stand. Good luck!

1. "Black strap" is a cowpuncher term for which of the following? An item of food or feed? A type of lizard found in Wyoming? The camp cook?

2. What is the difference in meaning of the two Western terms, "blow in" and "blow out"?

3. One of the following is not a Western term for cemetery. Which one is not? Jack O'Neil's ranch? Campo santo? Ghost farm?

4. True or false? A "*chaparro*" is an ever-green oak.

5. True or false? "*Coulee*" is the cowpuncher's term for a Chinese cook.

6. On what part of an animal was a "Texas county brand" located?

7. What is a "droop horn"?

8. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, to "dry gulch"?

9. True or false? According to Western terminology, a "floating outfit" is an outfit which drives cattle up the trail, and then takes a boat back to a spot near its headquarters.

10. True or false? A "fly" is a cloth spread at the end of the chuckwagon to make shelter for the cook.

11. What is a "gotch ear"?

12. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told

you he had "got his spurs tangled up," which of the following things would you think had happened to him? He'd simply become mixed up about something? He'd been arrested for stealing? He'd been threatened with hanging by the local vigilantes?

13. True or false? Cowpunchers find it comfortable to squat on their heels—say, around a campfire.

14. What is the meaning of the Western slang term "hell in his neck"?

15. If the ranch boss sent you out to find a "lint back," you should return with: A white horse with long hair? A cotton picker? An old Indian who needed a bath?

16. True or false? A "lizard" is a type of sled once used in the West.

17. What is the meaning of the term "picking a sleeper"?

18. True or false? Some punchers have been known to "picket" a horse by digging a hole, tossing the knotted end of a rope into the hole (the horse is tied to the other end of the rope), and then packing down dirt on top of the knot.

19. What is a "stub horn"?

20. True or false? "Strings" is a Western term sometimes used in place of "saddle strings."



*The pen is mightier than bullets—but not when
you're there for life!*

BULLET FOOLISH

By PHILIP KETCHUM

WHEN he recovered consciousness he was lying face down in a pool of water. He was cold and a throbbing pain in his head made it almost impossible to think or remember, clearly, just what had happened. He could hear men's voices—but the words which at first came to him made no impression on his mind. He tried to roll over but there was no strength left in his arms.

"He's waking up," said one of the men. "Throw some more water on him, Sam.

This fellow is our key to the bank."

Joe Carlin heard that, and remembered abruptly what had happened. He had been visiting Mary Altsheller. He had left her home and had started towards the place where he roomed. These four had stopped him. In spite of the darkness and of the way their broad-brimmed hats had hidden their faces, he was sure he had never seen before. They had asked him his name and when he had given it, one of the four had nodded and had said, "You're the fel-

low we want to talk to. Turn around and head back up the street." A gun in his hand had emphasized the order.

Joe hadn't argued the matter. He had tried to speak but the words he might have said had stuck in his throat. Even when they had come to the bank of the river and the men had made their proposition he hadn't been able to talk. A fear such as he had never before experienced had frozen his tongue.

Icy cold water splashed over his head and shoulders. Joe Carlin sucked in a long, deep breath. He didn't move.

"Roll him over," said the voice he remembered. "If water won't wake him up we'll slap him awake. I didn't hit him hard enough to put him out very long."

Hands caught him by the shoulder and rolled him over on his back. Joe stared up into the star-filled sky and at the four vague figures gathered around him. He tried to think of a way out; tried to believe that this was a nightmare, but this was something which was actually happening.

"Sit up, Carlin," ordered one of the men. "Sit up or I'll have to hit you again. If I do, it'll be all over for you. That's a promise."

Joe sat up. He closed his eyes against a momentary dizziness, then opened them again and looked at the man who was the leader of these four. He was a big man heavy, broad-shouldered and bearded. He had a deep, rumbling voice and a quick, vicious temper. He had taken Joe's silence a while before as stubbornness, or defiance, and had lashed out with his gun in sudden anger.

"You've got one more chance, Carlin," the man was saying. "You work in the Tubec bank. You have the key to the side door. You know the combination of the safe. Let us in and open the safe for us and you can enjoy the privilege of living for a while longer. Refuse, and this is where you die."

Joe Carlin tried to swallow the thick

lump which was again choking him. He tried to steady himself. "You'll kill me anyhow," he answered.

"Maybe we will," said the bearded man. "Yep, maybe we will. But there's a chance that we won't. It's a chance you'd better take. Help him to his feet, Ben. Let's see if he can stand."

One of the men stooped over and pulled Joe to his feet. Another man stepped up behind him, and a gun jabbed him in the ribs.

"You'd better say yes, Carlin," grated a voice. "You'd better say yes in a hurry."

There was nothing else to do if he wanted to live. There was no other course to follow. Joe Carlin nodded his head. He stumbled forward and would have fallen if the bearded man hadn't caught him.

THEY walked him back to town, pausing for a moment in the deep shadows of the feed store at the head of the main street. It was late, probably after midnight. The only lights showing came from the Adobe saloon. Two saddled horses stood at the tie-rail in front of it. There was no one on the street.

Joe Carlin recalled his first glimpse of this street, almost a year before. He had come to Tubec on a Saturday afternoon, arriving on the stage from Camarillo. The street had been thronged with people. The men wore rough clothes and most of them had guns belted around their waists. They talked a language he didn't understand. He had come here from Boston with a letter to Frank Parkinson, who had a job for him in the bank. He had come west on the advice of doctors, because of a persistent cough. He had almost taken the next stage back.

Many times since he had been glad that he hadn't. He had discovered that the men here weren't so different from men

any place else. He had learned to understand their talk, and had made friends. He had learned to ride; the cough had disappeared. He had come to like it here. He had found a ranch on Nine Mile Creek which he could buy. He had been looking forward, recently, to the day when he could leave the bank and strike out for himself as a rancher and cattleman. He had found the girl who was ready to share such a venture with him. . . .

"We'll circle around back," said the bearded man. "We'll come up behind the bank and go in through the side door. Ben will wait there. Dick will watch at the front corner."

Joe Carlin bit his lips. He was still trying, desperately, to think of a way out. They would pass near Sheriff Dave Wallace's on the way to the bank.

A gun poked him in the ribs. "Let's get moving, Carlin," said the bearded man.

They circled towards the bank. "If you're a good boy," the bearded man was saying, "maybe I'll only tap you on the head after you've unlocked the safe. It's entirely up to you, Carlin."

Joe Carlin reached for his keys, and unlocked the side door to the bank and stepped through it as he had on almost every morning for almost a year. The bearded man and the one called Sam followed him.

"No matches," whispered the bearded men. "Lead the way to the safe. You can find it in the dark, I know. When we get there, Sam will strike a match and hold it while you work the combination. Don't make too many mistakes. Don't take too long. If you stall, I'll forget what I said about maybe leaving you here alive."

Joe made no answer to this, but moved forward through the darkness. The bearded man kept close behind him, kept a gun pressed against his back. Joe reached the safe, and leaned against it for a moment. A gray light sifted in through the windows but there was no depth to

it—back here against the safe it was totally dark.

"Strike your match, Sam," the bearded man ordered. "Shield it from the front of the bank."

The match flamed up. Sam crowded closer. He cupped his hands around it and held it so that Joe could see the markings on the dial.

"Get started," grated the bearded man.

Joe fumbled at the dial. He could make a mistake. A braver man, he told himself, would do just that. He held his knowledge of the combination in trust. A man with more courage would not betray such a trust. He would die first. Joe's hand fell away. The match Sam was holding had burned down. Sam blew it out.

"Another," said the bearded man.

"The safe's unlocked," Joe muttered. "Most of the money is in the locked cash compartment. Here is the key."

He fumbled in his pocket and drew out the key. The bearded man reached for it. He tried the safe door, pulled it open. A chuckle sounded deep in his throat. He said, "Fine, Carlin. You've been a good boy."

Pain exploded in Joe's head. A thousand pin-points of light danced in front of his eyes and then blinked out. He had no memory of falling to the floor.

IT WAS still dark when he came to, but more light was showing at the windows and he knew that dawn could not be far away. The driving pain in his head was almost more than he could stand. He lifted his fingers to his scalp and they came away bloody.

For minutes, then, Joe Carlin didn't move. He tried to come to a decision. He would see Dave Wallace and tell him what had happened, but there was little real information he could give the sheriff. He couldn't accurately describe the four men who had forced him to open the safe. The three names he had heard, Dick, Sam and

Ben were so common they might hold no meaning. By this time the bearded man and his companions were miles away, too far away to be followed even if the direction they had taken could be determined.

Joe got slowly to his feet and looked into the safe. The cash compartment which had held over eight thousand dollars was empty. The drawer underneath had been emptied of the papers it held. Joe pulled the drawer all the way out and found the sack of gold still there behind it. The robbers had missed the biggest prize—they had taken eight thousand dollars in paper money and silver, but they had missed twenty thousand in gold. Twenty thousand which Frank Parkinson had insisted on hiding, even though it was in his safe. Joe removed the sack of gold and hid it in a little-used closet.

The town was still asleep. The thing to do was get to Dave Wallace at once, even though it might be too late for Wallace to do much about the robbery. And it wasn't going to be easy to face Wallace or Frank Parkinson, or the others here in Tubec. The loss of eight thousand dollars would hurt a good many people for this was a home-owned bank, and half of the people in town owned stock in it.

Word of the robbery of the Tubec bank caused considerable excitement throughout the valley. A posse, hastily organized by Sheriff Wallace, picked up the trail of the bank robbers and followed it into the rugged foothills of the Guadalupe mountains. There the trail was lost. The four men had been tentatively identified, the bearded man as Manny Reed, the others as Dick Hobart, Sam Bristow and Ben Krause.

"Manny Reed is a clever outlaw," said Wallace. "He will use his gun if he has to, but if he can pull a job without risk to himself or his men, he prefers it that way. He did this same thing in a town in Texas, only it was the owner of the bank he held up and forced to open the safe."

"There's no question about Carlin's story, is there?" someone asked.

"None at all," said Wallace. "I checked every angle. I saw the prints where they talked to him and clubbed him at the river bank. And that cut on his head from Manny Reed's gun is a cut he couldn't have given himself."

"He could have refused to open the safe," said Hugh Nelson.

"You wouldn't have," said Wallace. "Not many men would, with a gun at their backs."

"Twenty-eight thousand," muttered Nelson. "The bank will fold if we don't get it back."

This was perhaps the truth. There had been two meetings of the shockholders. Business at the bank had been suspended. Frank Parkinson was doing what he could to raise money, but the loss of twenty-eight thousand was a pretty severe blow. When Parkinson had first heard of the robbery he had hoped, desperately, that the twenty thousand in gold, hidden back of the drawer, had been overlooked. He still couldn't understand by what accident the robbers had found it. He had questioned Joe Carlin on this point.

"I didn't tell them a thing," said Joe earnestly. "They didn't ask me. They just made me open the safe. The minute I had it open they hit me over the head."

"I still don't see how they found that gold," Parkinson grumbled. "If we had it, we could manage. We could absorb an eight-thousand-dollar loss. It would hurt, but we could do it."

Joe bit his lips. He offered no comment. He had changed, considerably, since the robbery. He had always had a ready grin but his grin had disappeared. He spent most of his spare time in his room.

Joe watched the days march past. The bank had reopened on a rather shaky financial basis. Joe was back at work. The bandage was gone from his head, after a week, and he seemed to be making an

occasional effort to bring forth a smile.

Once, when Parkinson was at lunch and when no one was in the bank, Joe made a quick trip to the closet where he had hidden the gold. It hadn't been touched. Twenty thousand dollars, and everyone thought the robbers had taken it. The reward notices put out by the bank had listed the loss at twenty-eight thousand. A tight, grim look came into Joe's face, and he touched the gun in his coat pocket. He was playing a dangerous game, playing it alone.

FOR some time previous to the bank robbery, Joe Carlin had been visiting Mary Altscheller three evenings a week. He picked up this habit once more, and if at times he seemed lost in his own thoughts Mary overlooked it. Joe would work his own way out of this, Mary told herself. He was too steady to let what had happened bother him long.

Joe had been on his way home from Mary's the night the bearded man and the others had stopped him, and this trip home still wasn't easy. He walked it at night, now, holding his gun, aware of a tension which never lessened until he neared the house where he roomed. He walked it slowly, always probing the shadows which lay ahead. There were a dozen times when he anticipated danger and when a chilling perspiration oozed through his skin. And finally there came the night he had been expecting, the night when it wasn't his imagination which deceived him, the night when the shadows were real.

He saw the men waiting for him, just ahead. He saw them although the darkness in which they stood so nearly hid them that his seeing them was half a guess. He moved steadily forward and as on other nights, and when he got past the corner of the old Crawford home, he saw nothing. He quickened his steps, but at the sound of the voice behind him, came to a rigid stop.

"Just a minute, Carlin," someone was saying, and the voice was one he remembered. "Just a minute. We want to talk to you."

His muscles froze. For an instant he couldn't have moved if his life had depended on it. This was what he had been expecting. This was what he had faced in his thoughts a hundred times. But in thinking of it he had faced it with courage and decision and daring. He hadn't stood like a block of stone, unable to move, aware of the mad throbbing of his heart and the quickness of his breath.

Footsteps came up behind him, and the bearded man appeared at his side. "Let's move over here, Carlin, where we won't be disturbed," the bearded man was saying. "You know, you're more clever than I thought."

He was being turned around and led back toward the Crawford home, which had long been empty, and he was putting up no resistance at all. The courage he had thought he had built had drained away. He had forgotten about the gun in his pocket.

The other men were waiting in the yard behind the Crawford home. They gathered around him silently.

"Where is the twenty thousand dollars?" asked the bearded man.

Joe moistened his lips. "What do you mean?" he heard himself asking.

"Sam," said the bearded man. "Strike a match. Let Carlin see your face."

A match flared and Joe found himself staring at a man he had known as Arthur Morse, a rancher from the foothill district. Then the match went out.

"Maybe you recognized Sam's face," said the bearded man. "Sam has been around Tubec quite a lot for the past month or so. He has learned things. Mighty interesting things. When I first heard about that twenty thousand we missed I thought it was just a come-on to lead us back here into a trap. But

it wasn't, was it, Carlin? We actually missed a sack with twenty thousand in gold in it. The bank missed it, too. As I said, you were clever, Carlin. Mighty clever, but not clever enough. You woke up before you were found. You took the twenty thousand, knowing we would be blamed for it. What you should have done was get out of the country. It's nice for us that you didn't."

JOE pulled in a slow, ragged breath, and made no answer.

"We want that twenty thousand," said the bearded man. "We've come to collect it. Just tell us where to find the money."

"I'll—I'll give you half of it," Joe stuttered.

"You'll give us all of it," snapped the bearded man.

Joe shook his head.

The bearded man whipped his gun into the air and Joe, instinctively, ducked. The gun barrel, slashing down, scraped his cheek. Joe covered his head with his arms, expecting another blow.

"Easy, Manny," said one of the other men. "What we want is the twenty thousand. This fellow knows where it is, and no one else does."

"Where is the gold?" Manny Reed asked again.

"It's still in the bank," said Joe Carlin.

"You're lying."

Joe shook his head. "I'm not lying. I took it from the safe. I hid it where I was sure no one would look. I've not had the chance to move it."

"Where did you hide it?"

"In one of the cupboards under the counter below a loose floor board."

"He might be telling the truth at that," said the man Joe had known as Arthur Morse. "It was after dawn before he got to the sheriff. If it was light before he recovered consciousness he wouldn't have risked moving the money outside. After-

wards the bank was closed for almost a week. If the gold was hidden inside, he would have left it there until he was ready to run out."

Manny Reed tugged at his beard, scowling at Joe. "All right," he said grimly. "We'll go over to the bank and take a look."

"I get half the gold," said Joe stubbornly.

"Yeah," said Manny Reed slowly. "You get half."

It was earlier than it had been when they had gone to the bank almost a month before. There were lights in several houses and in the hotel and in Waddell's saloon as well as the Adobe. Half a dozen saddled horses were at the tie rails along the main street. They came up back of the bank, just as they had before.

"This shouldn't take long," said Manny Reed gruffly. "Dick will watch again at the corner, Ben at the door. Sam and I will go inside with you. We'll get the money and get out. We'll take it down to the grove by the river to make our split. We ought to be in and out of the bank in a couple of minutes."

Joe's right arm, dangling at his side, could feel the bulk of the gun in his coat pocket. He hadn't been searched. He was just a bank clerk, not expected to carry a gun. These men were scornful of him as an equal, and he could be glad of that, now. It was one point in his favor.

"Let's go," said Manny Reed. "And let's get that sack of gold in a hurry. No fumbling, Carlin. You'll die mighty quick if you try to cross me."

"I get half the gold," Joe muttered.

"Of course you do," said Manny Reed.

They moved around to the side door of the bank; Joe reached for his key, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. Manny Reed and Sam Bristow were close behind him.

"Let's get to that counter," said Manny Reed.

A gun barrel was thrust suddenly against Joe's back and the outlaw's other hand caught his arm.

They moved ahead. Every muscle in Joe's body was tense. He was cold with perspiration. He was short of breath. They came to the gate at the end of the counter. Joe fumbled with the catch, and as he stepped behind the counter Manny Reed stayed with him still holding his arm. A gun was still pressed against his back. On his other side stood Sam Bristow.

"There are some things that have to be moved on the floor," Joe said.

"Then get started," grated the outlaw.

He released his hold on Joe's arm and Joe dropped to his knees. Under the length of the counter was a storage place for records, forms and reports. Joe opened a door of this cabinet. He slid one hand into his pocket and grasped his gun, and with the other pulled out a pile of printed forms. Manny Reed's gun was no longer digging into his back but he knew it covered him.

"Get down there with him, Sam," Manny Reed ordered. "Strike a match and see what he's doing."

Sam Bristow moved around and knelt down at his side. Joe held his gun close at his side and he took a quick look over his shoulder at the hulking figure of the bearded man. His legs muscles felt tightened.

Sam Bristow scratched the match he had drawn from his pocket, and as it burst into flame Joe Carlin jerked to his feet, twisting toward Manny Reed. He swung his gun up, squeezing the trigger. He heard Manny Reed's startled cry, heard the explosion of the outlaw's gun merging with the roar of the one he had fired. A streak of fire knifed through his side. Joe pulled the trigger again, his gun thrust toward the outlaw as he stepped backwards, his big figure rocking from side to side. Joe swung then toward Sam Bristow, who had dropped his match and

come to his feet. He threw a shot at Bristow and beyond Bristow saw the figure of another of the outlaws in the open side doorway of the bank. He turned his gun that way and fired once more, and then again as the man in the doorway ducked out of sight.

There was a spatter of gunfire from the street but Joe Carlin was only vaguely aware of it. He leaned against the counter where he had so often stood during the daytime banking hours. His mind was suddenly hazy. He could feel the warmth of the blood gathering at the wasteband of his trousers. The pain his side was spreading up and down his body. There was no strength left in his legs. Only the counter held him up. He turned his head, but he could see no one. The deep shadows along the floor behind the counter hid the figures of both Reed and Bristow.

Joe eased himself to his knees, then turned and sat down, fighting against the gathering darkness which filmed his eyes. His head sagged forward and he quit fighting the shadows which were closing in around him.

HALF a dozen men filled into the extra room in Doc Hooper's home.

Parkinson was there, Dave Wallace, the sheriff, Dan Altsheller, Phil Harkins, the Caldwell brothers and Ollie Price who ran the stage lines. They stood in a silent group near the door.

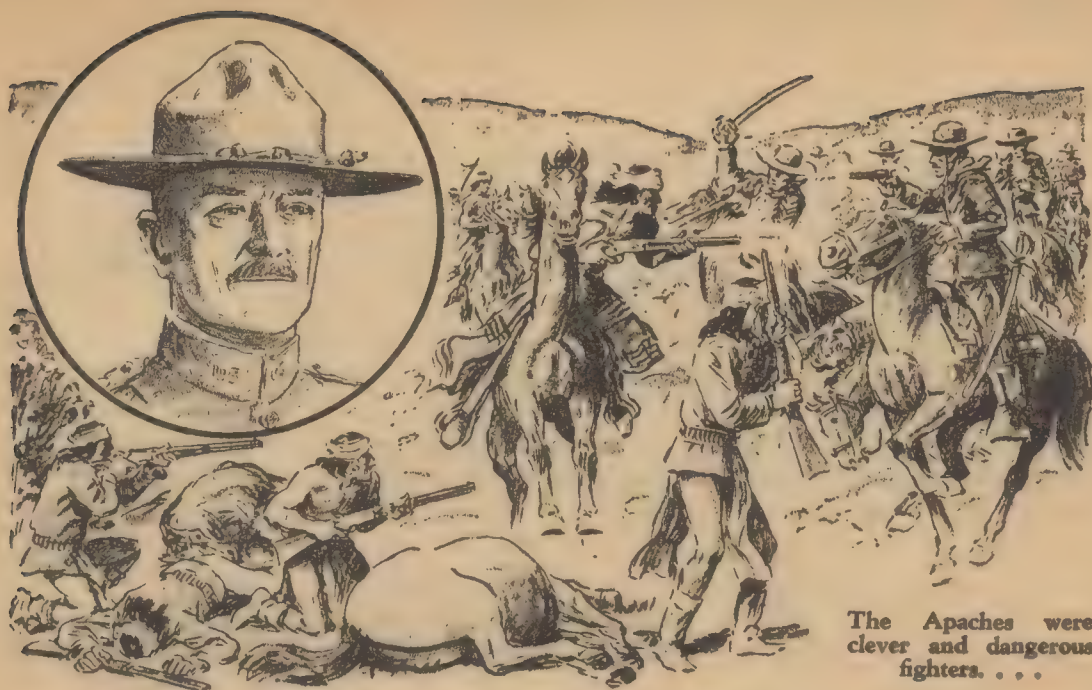
"You can only stay a minute," said Doc Hooper. "Joe can answer a few questions, but that's all. One of his ribs deflected the bullet. He has a nasty wound but he'll be up and around again sooner than you think, if he gets the proper rest to start with. So go easy on him."

Dave Wallace cleared his throat but before he could speak Joe Carlin had something to say.

"They didn't get away, did they?"

"I should say not," answered the sher-

(Continued on page 128)



The Apaches were
clever and dangerous
fighters. . . .

MAN OF BATTLE

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

*Hell couldn't hold young shavetail Pershing
—neither the red hell of the scalp country—
nor the flames across the Big Water!*

JOHAN J. PERSHING was tempered in the Indian wars of the American West. That was a hot spot to send a young second lieutenant just out of West Point—but Pershing took it in stride.

Soldier metal takes years of tempering, and often the furnace is hard to find. But there was one ready at hand for young Pershing—the campaigns against the Apaches on the Arizona and New Mexico borders back in the eighties. He was ordered to report to the Sixth Cavalry under General Nelson A. Miles.

Miles had recently succeeded General George Crook in Arizona and New Mexico. The Apaches were clever and dangerous fighters. The government had hard work keeping them in hand. It was said

that no tribe of redmen had more virtues in peace or vices in war than they.

It was they who turned back the invading Spaniards centuries before. Cortez and his men had firelocks and steel corselets, the redmen only bows and tomahawks. But the invaders learned respect, for all their flaming odds.

Now it was the duty of General Crook, and later of General Miles, to compel order and obedience. Infractions of the law had to be dealt with according to white law. The Western plains were wide, but not wide enough for white and red law to work together.

General Crook had gone down there in 1871 and had put things to rights. All Apache bands were subdued but

one—the Chiricahuas. All might have been well save for one man. He was called Geronimo, which is Spanish for Jerome. It was he who stirred the country to trouble.

Mexicans in Sonora and Chihuahua began to wail to Washington. The Chiricahuas would dash over the border, thief and devastate, then dash back for cover. Geronimo had fled once when the government moved his tribe to the San Carlos reservation. He was caught and compelled to be peaceable with the rest of the warriors. But peace did not last long.

One day the Indian agent sent his sheriff to get a certain Chiricahua. The fellow ran and the sheriff's bullet missed its intended mark and killed an old squaw. Such marksmanship enraged the Indians. At any rate in 1882 Geronimo took all his grievances and a band of rambunctious Sannups and made a raid into Sonora. General Crook pulled him out of the Sierra Madre Mountains and the big chief again became a tiller of the soil.

In 1884 he again went on a rampage. He was becoming a legend. He terrorized settlers in Arizona and New Mexico. Crook got orders to take him, dead or alive. Geronimo fled to the Sierra Madres again. The other Apaches were by this time anxious to see the trouble-maker put away for good.

This was the situation and the country to which Lieutenant John J. Pershing went in 1886—a drawling, blue-eyed young fellow who wanted to be shown. . . .

He was just in time to be in on the final capture of Geronimo. He was with the army units that captured the troublesome chief and three hundred and forty of his followers. He took his first baptism of fire without a murmur and looked forward to a career of excitement.

He was a handsome chap, but too bashful to lay claim to smiles from the ladies. His jaw was long and jutting, a

determined jaw if there ever was one. And he was "solid"—the sort of fellow you know you can always depend upon. He needed these qualities and more on the border.

Early in 1887 a station ran out of supplies and Pershing was given a pack train of one hundred and forty mules to escort through raiding Indians. Harassed constantly by small bands of redmen, he drove forty-six hours without a let-up, left twenty-one redskins for dead and delivered the provender unscathed. For this exploit he was complimented on paper by General Miles.

His next chance to show his quality came one day when a gang of bad men—bronco-busters turned horse thieves—shot down three Apaches in a raid on their corrals. The redskins rose up and drove the outlaws to cover in an old log house.

Pershing was dispatched to bring them in for trial.

He took only a small detachment, but he interrupted the blood-thirsty circling of one hundred and fifty Indians bent on revenge.

He walked over to the outlaws' cabin and kicked on the door.

"I've come to take you in, boys."

"Not by a long shot!" swore one.

"By a short shot, then," said Pershing. "Come on!"

"But they'll kill us!"

They started to come out, guns cocked.

Pershing said, "Put them down, you won't need them."

The outlaws stared at the cool young cavalryman, and obeyed.

He led them through the ranks of glaring redmen, put them on the horses he had and took them in.

Pershing studied the Indians, their customs, character, speech. They trusted him. There was something about the hard, straight look of his blue eyes that won confidence—Pershing was square and the redmen knew it.

December 1, 1890, he was ordered to take the field in the campaign against the Sioux at Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota. For nearly a year he fought in the Dakotas. The Sioux were fierce fighters. Custer had dropped before their onslaught a decade earlier.

Pershing played his part in the last fight against the Sioux. Sitting Bull was the opponent chief. Whether right or wrong, the Sioux believed their old chief, Crazy Horse, had been treacherously seized and bayoneted, and their battle cry was, "Remember Crazy Horse!"

That last fight went against the redmen. The whites were posted around the teepees. They demanded the turning over

of all arms. The Indians refused. They said they had paid for their weapons.

Quickly came the sharp order:
"Fire!"

The whites called it the battle of Wounded Knee. The Indians called it the massacre of Wounded Knee.

But this dispute does not affect Pershing. He was there, in the thick of the battle, to obey and be obeyed. He acquitted himself in a way that commanded respect. Whatever may have been his feelings on the battle, he was in no position to speak them.

On September 25, 1891, he became professor of military science and tactics at the University of Nebraska.

Answers to Cattle Country Quiz

(Questions on page 101)

1. "Black strap" is a term for molasses.

2. "Blow in" means come to town, or to spend money. "Blow out" is a big celebration.

3. "Ghost farm" is not a Western term meaning cemetery.

4. True. A "chaparro" is an evergreen oak.

5. False. A "coulee" is a dry creek bed. It is not a slang term for a Chinese cook.

6. A Texas county brand was located on an animal's neck. Generally, it consisted of a letter or group of letters, indicating a specific Texas county, and was thus intended to make cattle-stealing more difficult for rustlers.

7. A "droop horn" is an animal with droopy horns.

8. The Western slang term to "dry gulch" means to ambush.

9. False. A "floating outfit" is a group of men who stay out in the winter branding calves which for some reason have not been branded previously.

10. True. A "fly" is a cloth spread at the end of the chuck wagon to make shelter for the cook.

11. A "gotch ear" is an animal whose ear droops as a result of an accident, insect infestation, or for another reason.

12. If your cowpuncher friend told you he had "got his spurs tangled up," you should know that he had simply become confused about something.

13. True. A favorite position of the cowpuncher is squatting on the heels. Needless to mention, it is not a comfortable position for the tenderfoot who wears flat-heel shoes.

14. A man or animal is said to have "hell in his neck" when he is determined or tenacious about something.

15. If the ranch boss sent you out to find a "lint back", you should return with a cotton picker. "Lint back" is the cowpuncher's term for persons who perform this job.

16. True. A "lizard" is a type of sled once used in the West.

17. Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether or not an animal has been branded, or if branded, what brand he bears. This is particularly true if it is winter and the animal has long hair. If an animal's brand is covered up with hair, this hair may be plucked out and the brand sometimes determined. The act of doing this is called "picking a sleeper."

18. True. A horse may often be "picketed" by tossing the knotted end of his rope in a hole, and packing dirt on top of the knot. Oddly enough, this often satisfactorily holds the horse.

19. A stub horn is an animal which has had his horns worn and broken through years of fighting, accidents, etc. A battle-scarred human being is also sometimes called a stub horn.

20. True. "Strings" is sometimes used as an alternate for "saddle strings."

SHOOT FAST- OR DIE!

*"There's only two ways to square a dead man's
debt, kid . . . shoot fast—or die slow!"*



—By KENNETH FOWLER—

CHAPTER ONE

Stage to Boothill

TOM BRETT sought vainly to ease his lanky frame into a position of reasonable ease on the stage's warped leather cushions, but regardless of the adjustments he made, the result was

always the same. The scrub-bordered pass through which they were now rolling, flanked on the right by a sheer drop-off to the creek canyon below, was made for grandeur, but certainly not for the comfort of man, and after three days and nights of this endless jolting and swaying Brett's pain-wracked body had developed a chronic stiffness which no amount of twisting and turning seemed to relieve.

Neither could the somber run of his thoughts find any relief in the knowledge that he was at last going home. He stared out at the landscape whizzing past, his quiet, gray-blue eyes slitted abstractedly. In all likelihood he had no home, now; or, if he did have, it would be a place of grim and silent emptiness, haunted by the specter of death and the uneasy memories of the past. His thoughts built a dark frame around the letter he had received from his father's old friend, Luke Guthrie:

Friend Tom:

I got bad news for you, Tom. Your father was bushwhacked last week, on his way to town to pay off the back taxes on Bar Shoe. He had four hundred and fifty dollars on him, and it was gone when they found him.

Nobody knows who done it, but I got a sneakin notion Sol Tetherow could tell, if he was of a mind to. Tetherow bought the Harvey Kriedemaker place, couple months back, and me and Steve Haslip have had offers for our places. A lawyer name of Sime Lenroot come to see us. We might as lief have give him our spreads, all he would pay, and he wouldn't say who was his client.

But all the little shirt-tail outfits around here been losing cows and I hear talk Tetherow is plannin to run in some gun-hands. Looks like there is some kind of range grab in the makin, and I'll eat woolly meat if it ain't Tetherow behind it.

We got a new sheriff here, Ad Pulver, but he don't seem able to do nothin. Will

Brett slammed violently against the wall as Pulver lifted the gun with relentless slowness. . . .



tell you more when you git back. I have took care of the burial.

Your friend,
Luke

Preoccupiedly, Brett swung his glance, putting his attention on the lean, narrow-jawed face of the man who occupied the seat beside him, Wayne Spargo. Fatigue lay heavy on Spargo; his face had a tired pallor, and for the last couple hours he had been dozing intermittently. The man's dust-powdered black Stetson was tipped forward across opaque and uncommunicative blue eyes that were a little icy even when he smiled, and his coarse, Indian-black hair gave off a faint bluish gleam in the hot sunlight spearing through the stage's noisily flapping curtains.

Brett had heard of a Spargo who had fought for McSween in the Lincoln County war, and it was not a common name in these parts. Introducing himself when he had boarded the stage at Squaw Falls, two days before, Spargo had volunteered only the perfunctory information that he, too, had business in Alkali Wells. He had offered no clue as to its nature, and Brett had been only casually interested when Spargo had asked if he knew Sheriff Ad Pulver. But now, his glance dropping to the gunman's flat thigh, Brett thought again of the letter from Luke Guthrie, and wondered if Spargo's business in Alkali Wells might not be connected with Sol Tetherow's ambitious spreading out. It seemed logical that it might be, and Brett was conscious of a feeling of recoil from the man.

A sensation of lonely bitterness welled in him suddenly. At least Spargo had a job to look forward to, he would have someone to meet and talk to when the stage pulled up in another hour or so at the old log Pioneer Hotel, on Main Street. It occurred to him that he would feel more like a stranger in Alkali Wells than Wayne Spargo.

And after two years of fiddlefooting

around the country, what did he have to show for it all? A poke with a measly three hundred dollars in it—money he'd hoped to send his father, Lincoln Brett. Now it looked as if it wouldn't have been enough anyway. And what difference did it make, the way things had turned out?

A LOOK of somber vacancy hazed Brett's eyes. Inevitably, his thoughts traced a straight line back to Sol Tetherow and his niece, Ann. He'd been an impulsive young hot-head, in those days, more ornery than wild, but with a streak of stubbornness that would probably never do him any good. He'd been nineteen, Ann seventeen, when it had happened. Then on top of the trouble with Sol Tetherow had come the bitter quarrel with his father, and when the news got around, and neighbors began to grin wisely and talk about "that daunsied Brett kid," it had been more than he could take. He'd packed his warsack and headed for the Black Hills.

He thought of the night he'd waited for Ann with the buckboard, the night they'd planned to elope. With bitter remembering, his mind repeated those tense moments of waiting in her uncle's doorway, while the cicadas chirred in the thickets, gnawing at his nerves with their sleepy-sounding castanets, and moonlight silvered the long adobe ranch house, giving it a stark, sepulchral look in the hot, dark silence.

He remembered the soft opening of the door, he had the memory of Ann coming out upon the veranda, her skirt billowing whitely in the darkness, her drawn, tired-looking face a pale oval under its big, floppy straw hat. He remembered the quick, furtive kiss, the cloying sweetness of oleander in the air, the hushed sound of their voices, speaking in nervous, jerky whispers.

"Tom, don't you think we ought to

wait? He's been good to me, in his way. People just don't understand him."

Then his voice exploded angrily before she could finish. "Good to you! Sure, he's been good to you—the way a turn-key's good to the prisoner he keeps under lock and key! He's good to you letting you scrub and cook and wash for him so he can buy more cows and build more fences and lord it over all the little dirty-shirt outfits he'd like to boot out of this valley! Good Lord, Ann, haven't you let him buffalo you long enough?"

They had talked all this out before, but Ann answered, "He raised me, Tom. I never even knew my own father and mother. He's strict, I'll admit that. And he has his own ways of doing things. But he's always treated me as if I was his own daughter. It's just that he feels I'm too young to marry."

"Girls younger than you get married in this country, Ann."

Nervous, excited, whispered words; the cicadas chirring drowsily; and then the soft, padded step behind them, the long sinewy arm curving out of the dark, reaching the girl and abruptly pushing her back.

"Get into the house, Ann." The gaunt, lumbering shadow, advancing upon Brett. "You! You git on home and tell Linc Brett if I ever ketch you coyotin' around here again, I'll thrash the livin' daylight out of you. Now git!"

He remembered, even now, how the cold contempt of the words had stung him; scornfully, Sol Tetherow hadn't even offered him a man's challenge to stand up and fight.

And so he had stood tracked, a hot, reckless anger boiling up in him. "Ann's goin' with me, Tetherow," he had bitten out tightly. "From here out, you can do your own chores."

The fight hadn't lasted long. Tetherow, six-foot-three of knotted bone and gristle, had blasted him off the veranda with his

first savage clout. Half-stunned, he had lunged to his feet and had come charging back at the rancher like a fighting maniac. But his wild, slugging blows had been made to order for Tetherow's deadly, long-reaching fists. Tetherow had hacked him down with two final, murderous punches that had sent him crashing through the veranda rail, knocking him into insensibility.

He recalled, now, the blank look of terror frozen on Ann Tetherow's face when he had finally pulled himself to his feet. He hadn't realized until later that the girl had been paralyzed with fright, but he had been in no condition then to appreciate anyone's feelings but his own, and her silence, her panic-stretched eyes, pleading with him to go, had been like salt rubbed into the raw wounds of his defeat.

His mind built a picture of her as she had looked that night, coming out on the porch to meet him—a slim, brown-haired girl, with soft, gray eyes and a rounded loveliness of body molding gently towards full womanly maturity. The image stirred the old bitterness in him, and the feeling wound down in him with a sharpening intensity as he remembered his father's angry reaction to news of the fight.

"We got enough trouble on this range without you goin' out huntin' up more. Tetherow's right. The girl's too young to marry. And if you ain't man enough to lick Sol Tetherow, you ain't man enough to marry his niece. Now you forget all this whangdoodlin' nonsense, and git back to work."

He realized afterward, when it was too late, that his father's blunt advice had been not only well-intentioned, but the best that could have been given him. But at the time it had seemed coldly, harshly unsympathetic, and on an impulse of angry resentment he had packed his gear and ridden out of Skull Valley. And now his father was dead, bushwhacked. He had

left Lincoln Brett to carry on alone, but there can be no voiced rebuke from the dead; and his father would never know, now, how he had slaved and scrimped to get together this poke of three hundred dollars to send to him. A dryness came into Brett's throat. Phrases of the letter from Luke Guthrie bounced around in his head, like peas in a dried pod. *Run in some gun hands. . . . range grab in the makin' eat woolly meat if it ain't Tetherow behind it.*

BRETT was vaguely conscious of the coach picking up speed as his glance swung to Wayne Spargo. Apparently exhausted from his long ride, Spargo lay with his head cradled back against the quivering door of the coach, snoring peacefully.

Suddenly Brett's attention caught on an envelope lying at Spargo's feet. Reaching down, he picked it up and saw that it was a letter, addressed to Spargo. Maybe the letter would contain a clue as to the exact nature of Spargo's business in Alkali Wells. While he hesitated, an alarmed yell from the driver's box jerked him around. At the same instant, he had a sharp awareness that the coach was tearing along a sharp down-slant of the mountainside, rocking violently; and with a sudden alarm Brett thrust his head out through the window. Gripping the door to prevent being thrown from his feet, he looked up and saw Ed Jelp, the driver, half standing out of his seat, his thick body tipped back in a leg-straining brace. Jelp was sawing back on the ribbons with a desperate straining movement which seemed to be having no effect whatever on the madly racing horses.

Brett had a dim awareness of shouting, "What's wrong up there?" but the savage back-lash of wind against his face seemed to ram the words back in his throat. Abruptly, the left rear wheel of the coach skidded off a ditch rock, and the big

vehicle swayed, righted itself with a sickening lurch, then roared on, without any noticeable slackening of speed.

Jelp's voice had a remote, disembodied sound, whipping back at him above the blended tumult of screaming wheels, pounding hooves, and the taut-wire humming of the wind hammering against his ears.

"Can't stop 'em!" Jelp shouted in curt warning. "Brake's busted! Better git ready to jump!"

He never finished it. Less than a hundred feet ahead a hairpin curve loomed, the sharp pitch of a mountain to the left, a craggy ledge to the right, breaking off sheerly into a deep gulch from which the hollow thunder of a waterfall boomed distantly.

Jamming Spargo's letter into his pocket, Brett turned and shook the gunman's recumbent body.

"Spargo! Wake up!"

Spargo mumbled drowsily, cuffing at Brett's disturbing hand with a tired irritability.

Reaching behind him, Brett found the door latch, twisting it. He booted open the door with a backward kick of his right foot, then lunged forward and grabbed Spargo by the belt, yanking him violently out of the seat.

"Brett! What the devil, man! Damn it—"

Brett stood crouched in the doorway, his hand latched around the gunman's brass-studded gun belt, his buttocks projected out through the narrow opening, when a heavy object came plummeting down at him from the top of the driver's box.

It struck with the force of a catapult, and he felt his hand torn from the belt, felt himself hurled out and down. His ears rang to a screaming hell of sound, from somewhere ahead. Then blackness rushed in, muffling it, blotting out everything. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Hand

"ROOM twenty-two, second floor," the clerk said, tossing Brett a key. "Heard about the wreck. You better go up and wash. You can sign the register later."

Tom Brett nodded. "Much obliged. I could do with a wash. This grit feels like it's an inch thick under my hide." He picked up the key and headed for the stairway, his wide shoulders drooped with fatigue, every bone in his body throbbing from the jolting of the flat-bedded spring wagon that had brought him and Ed Jelp on into town. Luckily, the rancher who had found them back there on the trail had wasted no time in idle palaver. He had dropped Brett at the hotel, curtly dismissing the offer of pay, then had gone on to hunt up a doctor for Jelp, who still lay unconscious in the bed of the spring wagon.

The rancher, Dorp Lucas, had assured Brett that Wayne Spargo was dead. Lucas had worked his way as far as he had dared down the steep cut bank over which the coach had plunged, and had reported seeing Spargo's body sprawled lifelessly beside the wreckage of the overturned coach. Spargo, he had said, could not possibly have survived that drop of more than a hundred feet down the cut bank.

Up in the hot, single-windowed room under the eaves, Brett felt better after he had scrubbed the grit and blood from his face and had lifted the pitcher and poured the remainder off the water over his head, massaging his scalp vigorously with a clean towel. Then, remembering the letter he had picked up from the coach floor seconds before he and Jelp had leaped for their lives, he dipped a hand into his jacket pocket and took it out.

A sudden excitement ran through Brett as he read the briefly scrawled message:

Friend Spargo:

The Wednesday stage from Gold City will be due here Sat. A.M., the 13th. Be on it. Register at the Pioneer. I'll meet you there and give you my proposition.

The Linc Brett killing has got the people worried. I need a good deputy. Bring this for identification.

A. P.

The word "deputy" was heavily underscored, Brett noted. Now, suddenly, he remembered Wayne Spargo asking him if he knew Ad Pulver. Obviously this note had been written by Pulver. Obviously, too, it seemed to Brett, Pulver was not easy over the reaction to Linc Brett's death and was planning to do something about it.

Brett frowned down at the fragment of soiled note paper, his thoughts darkening. Was Pulver on the track of something he was afraid to tackle personally? Had he uncovered some clue that tied Sol Tetherow to the killing of Lincoln Brett?

His eyes suddenly traced again across the last line of the note: bring this for identification. Plainly, Pulver knew of Wayne Spargo only by reputation and through correspondence. And the chance of anyone here in town remembering the gangling youth who once a month had accompanied Lincoln Brett to the Porteous store to lay in staples, would be remote enough to warrant the risk. Why not play out Spargo's hand? Why not bring him back to life—in the person of Tom Brett?

A half-hour later, having established his identity on the hotel register as "W. Spargo, Gold City, Mont.," Brett was starting back from a dish of beans and bacon at the Elite Lunchroom when his attention caught startledly on a sun-bonneted figure holding rein on a team of matched bays, in front of Porteous's old store.

He heeled around with a sharply caught breath. "Ann!"

A ribboned gatherment of crisp brown curls gave a quick flirt.

"Tom! Tom Brett!" For a bare instant, Brett had the feeling she was glad to see him; in the next moment, the warmth faded out of her voice, and her glance flicked nervously in the direction of the store.

"We'd better talk some other time, Tom. He's in Porteous's. If he comes out and finds you—"

"Let him," Brett interrupted her flatly. His eyes laid on her in level accusation. "Still afraid of him, aren't you, Ann?"

"No. Really, Brett, it's not that. But he's been terribly jumpy lately. I think he's upset over—over what happened to your father."

Brett's voice turned meager. "That's a laugh, and you know it."

She spoke with a sudden nervous vehemence, and now the old look of fright was back in her eyes. "No, Brett, no! You mustn't believe all this wicked gossip about him."

She broke off with an abrupt intake of breath. The door to Porteous's had come open and Sol Tetherow was stepping down to the board walk, shouldering a thick gunnysack of provisions.

Brett instantly felt the stirring of his old antagonism for this arrogant man as Tetherow halted before him, standing spraddle-legged with the packed gunnysack still swung across his sinewy shoulder.

"So," Tetherow said thinly, "you've come back." His stone-cold eyes combed briefly over Brett's six-foot frame, bleakly measuring the change in him. He said, "I'll give you one warning." With an abrupt heave, he sent the hundred-pound sack of provisions hurtling off his shoulder into the back of the buckboard. He faced Brett, slapping dust from his calloused palms. "Don't come sniffin' around T-Square," he said. "Two years ain't changed my opinion of no-good saddle bums."

From the Gold Front Saloon, across

the street, Brett saw a pair of loungers idling under the wooden awning exchange sudden, wise grins. Anger boiled up in him.

"I'll see your niece any day or any way I please," he said.

He heard Ann's startled ejaculation, "Uncle Sol! Please, not here!" and had his warning of Tetherow's intention. He jerked up an elbow and turned the rancher's blow before it was fairly started. Ann was reaching down then, clawing at her uncle's coat sleeve, and abruptly Tetherow made his decision and stepped up into the buckboard, snatching the whip from its socket.

His sallow jaws quivered as he glared at Brett. "You stay out of my way," he blurted in a choked voice. "You were too damned chicken-gutted to stick with Linc Brett when he really needed you, and now when the pickin's look ripe you show up again, with your greasy paw stuck out for a handout. Brett, you stay off Skull range or you'll damned well wish you had!" With an explosive gesture he stung the rumps of the bays and the buckboard started with a violent jerk.

A drunken voice hooted at Brett from the doorway of the Gold Front. "Better not mix it with Sol Tetherow, mister. He'd have your hide quicker'n you c'd spit."

Brett gave the man a momentary vague attention, then turned and pitched into a determined, long-gaited stride, heading back towards the hotel.

A CHUNKY, florid-faced man with a silver star pinned to a flap of his leather vest was waiting in Brett's room, as he opened the door. He gave Brett the cool interest of a pair of pale, appraising eyes before he spoke, slouching back in the room's single chair with an irritating complacency.

"Clerk let me in," he said laconically. "I'm Ad Pulver."

Brett took off his hat and threw it across to the bed. "I'm Spargo," he said, and took the letter to Wayne Spargo from his pockets. He handed it to Pulver. "Here's the passport you wanted."

Pulver took it, gave it an indifferent glance, then slowly tore it into tiny pieces and dropped them on the floor.

"We got a man in this county been gettin' too big for his pants," he began without preamble. "Sol Tetherow. Ever hear of him?"

"I've just come from Montana," Brett answered mildly. "It wouldn't be likely, would it?"

"Hmph!" Pulver scraped his blond jaw bristle with a stubby-fingered hand, his thick mouth puffed in a faint pout. "Well, the nub of it's this," he said. "We think Tetherow's gettin' set to boot every little chicken-feed rancher out of the Skull Valley. Far as I can find out, he's been rustlin' 'em dizzy. We haven't been able to prove it yet. But now we gotta get action. People are beginnin' to holler. Last straw was when he bushwhacked Linc Brett. We can't prove that, either, but we will before we're through."

Brett was conscious of a cold prickling sensation at the back of his neck. "How?" he said.

"Like I'm gonna tell it to you now," Pulver said. He took a pair of foil-wrapped cigars from a pocket of his vest, tossed one carelessly to Brett, then delicately started picking the foil from the other. "Tetherow's already suspicious I know something. He'll be on his guard, the minute I do any snoopin' around at T-Square. But he wouldn't know you from a hole in the wall." He lighted the cigar. "It was an unusual caliber gun, the one that was used to kill Linc Brett—a .38-40. We found the shell in a little pocket of the hills up back of Hogback Bridge, where the bushwhacker was laid up. Pork Wilson was the only man in these parts had a gun of that caliber. But

the gun was stolen from Pork three weeks ago. We thing Tetherow stole the gun, hoping to frame the job on Pork, then got spooked out when the hullabaloo started and didn't dare plant it back where he'd got it."

Absently, Pulver rotated the cigar between even white teeth, his pale eyes squinted against the smoke curling up from its hot ash. "Your job," he said, "is to find that gun. There'll be five hundred in it if you do, and another five hundred if you can wring a confession out of Tetherow. And you can do it by wringin' his dirty murderin' neck, for all I give a damn."

He rose, a stocky, grizzled man, with an aggressively blunted chin and cold, steady-set eyes. The eyes bored into Brett. "I've heard good reports of your work with McSween. The job's yours if you want it. If you don't, say so now."

"I'm in," Brett said.

"Good! Anything you want, call on me, but if you come to my office make it after dark. All this has got to be under the vest from here out."

"I'll be making a little *pasear* up towards T-Square tonight," Brett said grimly. "I won't need anything, outside of a horse."

"I'll leave word at the livery," Pulver said, and went out, trailing the fragrant aroma of perfectos.

After he had left, Brett walked to the window, staring thoughtfully down at the deserted street. It hadn't changed much, since he'd come here as a kid, once or twice a month, in his father's rickety old buckboard. He thought of those times, and he thought of Lincoln Brett, the past pushing heavily against the dark run of his thoughts. But you couldn't recall the past. The past was water over the dam, gone forever. Maybe if he had stayed at Bar-Shoe things would have turned out differently; maybe not. Nothing in life is ever certain; fate weaves its com-

plicated patterns, and man abides by the result.

Brett stuck Pulver's cigar in his mouth, chewing on it thoughtfully. One thing was certain, though: Ad Pulver's theory seemed to confirm the suspicions of his father's old friend, Luke Guthrie. Brett suddenly recalled the blank look of fright in Ann Tetherow's eyes, when Sol Tetherow had come from Porteous's. Maybe Ann knew something. Maybe she knew where Tetherow had hidden that rifle!

Abruptly, Brett turned from the window, peeling off his gun belt, his shirt and his boots. He'd have time for a little shut-eye before tonight, and he would need it. He stretched out on the bed, but sleep refused to come immediately. His thoughts kept drifting to Ann Tetherow. At the mere sound of her voice, at a single soft glance of those pale, gray eyes, all of his old feeling for her had been abruptly stung alive again. Had he rightly seen an answer to it in her first pleased surprise at seeing him again? However that might be, there was no doubting her rigid loyalty, her unchanging and unchangeable feeling of obligation to the man who had been the only father she had ever known. And now, what if he should be the instrument in bringing Sol Tetherow to justice? Tom Brett sank finally into a troubled and restless sleep.

IT WAS an odd scraping sound, like a mouse scratching between the walls of the room, that pulled Brett awake suddenly, every nerve of his body instantly stretched taut. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat rigid, waiting. The scratching sound came again, and crossing silently to the door, Brett bent over, his ear down to the lock. There was no mistaking it now. Someone was tinkering at the keyhole.

A faint click sounded, and Brett stood back, tensed, waiting for the door to spring open. But it didn't open that way.

It swung inward slowly, cautiously, and a padded step followed it. Flattened against the wall, Brett saw the back of the intruder, saw the gun warily half raised in the man's hand. At the same instant, he had the shock of his life. His back made a faint brushing sound against the wall as he crouched to leap, and the man swung around, startled, as Brett catapulted into him, sending the gun spinning from his hand. *The man was Wayne Spargo!*

Spargo was not a big man, at least four inches under Brett's limber six-foot frame, but he was agile as an eel and twisted frantically in Brett's grasp, struggling to break away. They crashed backward into the wash stand and it tipped and went over, fragments of the smashed water pitcher flying into Brett's face. But now he was on top of Spargo, exerting powerful pressure against the gunman's desperately heaving shoulders, and suddenly he cupped the heel of his palm in Spargo's chin and drove him down and back, hard.

Spargo's head banged down against the tough hickory planking of the floor, but with the resiliency of a rubber ball he bounced up again, pushing his flattened palms against Brett's down-straining chest.

"Wait!" he gasped. "You're making a mistake. I—"

With grim concentration, Brett's grip on Spargo's shoulders forced him down. Then, abruptly releasing his hold, he crouched spraddle-legged over the man. His right arm was cocked back as Spargo instinctively lunged up, and Brett belted him under the point of the jaw.

Spargo's head jerked, then struck back against the floor with a sickening thud. For an instant, his pale eyes fluttered wildly; then he groaned, and his head flopped over sideways, and he lay still.

Brett rose stiffly, letting out a breath that seemed to sandpaper the bottom of his lungs as it came slowly up. Then,

stooping, he unbuckled Spargo's gun belt and walked across to the bed. Throwing the gun under it, he ripped off the coverlet and found the bed sheet, yanking it out. He tore the sheet into narrow strips, dragged Spargo to the chair and sat him in it. Then, carefully knotting the strips, he tied the unconscious man to the chair and stuffed a gag in his mouth.

After that he tip-toed to the door and looked guardedly out. The narrow hallway was quiet, deserted. Apparently no one had heard the scuffle. But he had little time, now. Sooner or later, some one would come into the room, find Spargo, and let him loose.

Brett put on his shirt and boots, then went over to the wall peg where he had hung his gun belt and put it on. He picked up his hat, pulling it low across his eyes. At the door, he took one last look back. Spargo sat in the chair with his black head lolled sideways, still unconscious. Softly, Brett opened the door, locking it behind him. Downstairs, the desk was deserted as he hurried past it. He reached the board walk and turned upstreet towards the livery.

CHAPTER THREE

Unknown Avenger

LUKE GUTHRIE'S Arrow G Ranch was a ten-mile ride from Alkali Wells, and on his way to T-Square Brett stopped there an hour, chatting with the old-timer. But Guthrie, a man of sixty or better, who in recent months had eked out a bare livelihood from his little three-up outfit, had been able to supply him information.

"Somebody's sure as hell aimin' to git control of this whole Skull range," the old man told him bitterly, "and it's my guess it's Sol Tetherow. I told you in my letter, didn't I, that Tetherow had bought out Harvey Kriedemaker?"

Brett nodded his head.

"Well, Kriedemaker didn't have no more'n a little siwash outfit, and he'd been rustled practi'cly down to his britches. But he had good grass, and they's a spring-fed pond on the place that never goes dry. Tetherow made that deal with Kriedemaker direct, but since all the rumors follyin' Linc's death, I don't guess he dares come out in the open no more. Them offers me 'n Steve Haslip got fur our places come kind of anti-godlin, from this lawyer, Sime Lenroot. Me and Steve kind of give him hold-off answers, but when Lenroot went to Bar-Shoe your dad give him a flat no—got so plumb red-necked when Lenroot kind of hinted he might be in for trouble if he didn't sell that Linc practi'cly kicked off the place."

"Then you figure that this Lenroot is just a go-between for Sol Tetherow, is that it?" Brett asked.

Luke Guthrie spat crankily across the porch rail. "I know damn well that's it! Tetherow claims he's been losin' cows, same as the rest of us, but I wouldn't trust that high-chinned old skinflint any fu'ther'n I could spit."

Without mentioning his plan of impersonating Wayne Spargo, Brett told the old-timer of his talk with Ad Pulver, and about the sheriff's discovery of the .38-40 shell.

"Don't mean nothin'," Guthrie grunted. "If Tetherow's got that gun, you kin be sure he's got it stashed where nobody's ever gonna find it." He added, scowling, "That Tetherow's slicker'n a greased shoat. Got plumb chummy with your dad, after you'd left. Even gave him a hand with a couple round-ups. Reckon he cal'clated that would make it look like him and Linc had buried the hatchet. Linc wouldn't listen to me, when I warned him Tetherow probably had some kind of sneaky hide-out card tucked up his sleeve."

Brett left then, after promising to drop over some night for a grubpile of Sara Guthrie's home-baked biscuits and blackstrap. But he had the feeling, after what Luke Guthrie had told him, that hunting for that .38-.40 at T-Square would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. . . .

Brett's thoughts, as he rode on, seemed to reflect the forbidding bice color now hazing the distant Skulls with the first dark veining of dusk. He was still a good five miles from Tetherow's ranch, and when he reached its borders a half hour later the bice tinge had altered to a deep indigo and a chill wind had begun cutting down from the mountains, tintured with the spicy scent of pine and juniper.

A hundred yards from the long, L-shaped ranch house, Brett dismounted behind a bouldered ridge, picketed the livery stable chestnut, and started down a sandy cut bank that led to a small clearing at the rear of the building. A spread of second-growth hackberry made a little motte there, and he hunkered down in it, watchfully studying the house and waiting for fuller dark to lay its belt of shadow across the rear yard.

Ten minutes dragged by. Then a light came on in the foot of the L, in the room Sol Tetherow used for a combination office and bedroom. Simultaneously, the kitchen door creaked open and Ann Tetherow stepped out into the yard. She held a lantern and a broom, Brett saw, and as she started up towards the darkened bunkhouse, he noticed she was wearing a pair of baggy old levis. Then he remembered that tonight was Saturday. The crew in all probability had gone to town, and Ann was going up there to do a little cleaning up.

Sol Tetherow would be in the house alone, now. He probably never would have a better opportunity than this. Cautiously, he waited until he saw Ann disappear into the bunkhouse, then moved out of his place of concealment in the motte of hackberry.

Reaching the door of the kitchen, he stepped softly across the threshold and halted just inside the doorway, tensed, his ears cocked for any sound. He could hear nothing, but a dozen feet to his right a wedge of light speared a yellow beam into the kitchen through a half-opened doorway.

A cool excitement rippled through him as he moved cautiously away from the door and inched his way along the room's right wall. Now he could see into the other room. He froze suddenly.

A green-shaded coal-oil lamp hanging from the room's low-beamed ceiling threw down a soft cone of light upon a littered desk top, and, beside the desk, upon a narrow couch-bed over which the tall, raw-boned figure of Sol Tetherow was bent. A window to the right of the bed had drawn curtains, but a bare half-inch of light seeped out through a tiny crevice at the closure point, where they had failed to come together snugly.

Abruptly Brett stiffened as Tetherow's hands came out from under the mattress, gripping an octagonal-barreled rifle. Tetherow brought it across to the desk and held it under the light, examining it with a frowning intensity. Brett took three steps and reached the half-opened door. He drew the big .45 anchored at his hip; at the same instant, he swung back his right foot and kicked the door open fully.

TETHEROW whirled with a startled gasp.

"Put down the rifle, Tetherow," Brett ordered flatly.

For a stunned instant, Tetherow stared at him with a blank look of shock. It faded swiftly into an expression of glowering anger. "What the devil are you doing in this house?" he demanded hoarsely.

Brett's voice leveled coldly. "I'm looking for a rifle," he said. "Maybe that one. Put it down, Tetherow. And be plenty careful how you do it."

"You meddling young fool!" Abruptly, Tetherow crashed the rifle down on the desk top, an apoplectic crimson staining into his sallow cheeks. "This isn't my gun!" he blurted out violently.

"No," Brett cut him off thinly, "it's Pork Wilson's. You stole it from him, then used it to back-shoot my father. Now you're getting ready to stash it back at Pork's. Only you delayed a little too long, Tetherow."

Tetherow took a menacing step forward, his big-knuckled fists clenched, his long-jawed face twitching.

"That's far enough!" Brett warned. With cold purpose, he leveled the .45 braced at his hip. "Don't come any closer unless you want—"

The roar of the shot came with a splintering crash of glass, the startling suddenness of a thunderclap. At the same instant Sol Tetherow cracked at the knees, his eyes bulging in startled astonishment. He made a grab for the desk, missed it, then swayed forward dizzily, crumpling in a loose sprawl at Brett's feet.

A step sounded in the kitchen. That would be Ann, Brett thought with sudden alarm, hurrying back from the bunkhouse. And what could he tell her? She would find him here, packing a gun, and her uncle dead on the floor beside him. And after that run-in he'd had this afternoon with Sol Tetherow—

"Don't move, Brett," came the flat, warning voice from the doorway.

Brett spun around. He felt his heart flop up and thud heavily against his ribs. Ad Pulver stood in the doorway, his blocky legs spread in an inverted V across the sill, a leveled Colt cocked in his knobbed right fist. And Pulver had called him Brett!

He brought up his voice from a frozen cavern at the pit of his stomach. "You're getting your brands crossed, Pulver. I told you who I was."

Pulver laughed flatly. "You're Tom

Brett all right—Linc Brett's saddle-bum whelp. What kind of a sheriff do you think I am, anyway? I had a little parley with Ed Jelp before I went up to the hotel. Spargo dropped over that cliff, not you."

His pale eyes bored at Brett with an icy fixity. "You came back to Skull Valley to get the killer of your father," he went on relentlessly. "And witnesses saw your ruckus with Tetherow at the Wells, this forenoon."

"I didn't kill Tetherow," Brett answered stonily. "I've still got five beans in the wheel of this gun. It's all I ever carry."

A smug expression stitched in a corner of Pulver's wide-curved mouth. "We'll fix that. Lay your gun on that desk."

Brett stiffened. Pulver was all set to frame him.

A faint rustling sound caught his attention, from the hallway. Then he saw Ann, a vague shadow outside the door frame, her face a chalky disk in the pale spray of light from the office.

Pulver's head jerked, and Brett rushed him, then. But for a big man, Pulver was quick.

The bullet laid a scorching streak of fire across Brett's left shoulder. At the same instant Pulver swung the gun and clipped Brett across the temple.

"Now—" Pulver panted, and never finished it. A face swam into the fog rolling up before Brett's eyes, a face resembling that of Wayne Spargo. The face seemed to bobble, to spread distortedly like a reflection on breeze-riffled water, and Brett's last hazy perception was of Ad Pulver's alarmed swinging around and jerking his gun towards it.

Brett felt himself sliding down against the wall.

HE WAS on a bed in a quiet, lamp-lit room, and two faces hovered above him in misty outline. For a moment they seemed to blur indistinguish-

(Continued on page 125)

POPULAR FILMS

**A Guide to
Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans**

Ted Palmer Picks:

For A Western: "The Streets of Laredo" with Macdonald Carey, William Holden. William Bendix, Mona Freeman (Paramount). Technicolor.



When three badmen split up and two get into the Texas Rangers by mistake, there's trouble afoot, pard. William Holden and William Bendix are the hombres who turn good and refuse to tip off their former partner, Macdonald Carey, on big jobs. This leads to complications when Holden refuses to bring in Carey—a source of irritation to the Rangers. Bendix, however, goes after him and gets shot (dead) for his efforts. *There's plenty of chase, shooting and blood in full color.*

* * *

For Adventure: "Down to the Sea In Ships" with Richard Widmark, Lionel Barrymore, Dean Stockwell (20th Century-Fox).



Although they finally lower the boom on Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore), the old whaling master, he still has time to indoctrinate his young grandson (Dean Stockwell) into the ways of the sea and whaling. Before the old man dies, however, he tussles with his first mate (Richard Widmark), an 1887 ninety-day wonder, with an ill-fated whaling attempt, storms and icebergs. *For those that like some salt—in their pictures and their eyes.*

* * *

For Mystery: "Homicide" with Robert Douglas, Helen Westcott, Robert Alda (Warner Brothers).



A transient worker, looking for a job, finds murder and murderers on a citrus ranch in California. After being threatened, he testifies that the ranch owner's death was accidental. His isn't, a few hours later, and Lieutenant Landers (Robert Douglas) has a hunch and some clues

that lead him to an out-of-town hotel. Questioning the bartender (Robert Alda) and hat-check girl (Helen Westcott), he gets a lead and returns to the citrus ranch where he finds a piece of telephone cable wound up on the plow of the tractor. This is the tip-off on an illegal racing wire service scheme. *The sleuthing is better than average.*

* * *

For Drama: "Knock On Any Door" with Humphrey Bogart and John Derek (Columbia).



Ex-Skid Row lawyer, Andrew Morton (Humphrey Bogart), unintentionally causes Nick Romano (John Derek) to become one of the more undesirable citizens on the wrong side of the tracks. Although marriage temporarily halts Nick's career of gambling and small-time thieving, he returns to his bad ways when he can't make the grade on an honest job. Picked up for cop-killing, Morton agrees to defend Nick who he thinks is innocent. With a not-guilty verdict almost won, Nick breaks down when the prosecutor insinuates that Nick's wife committed suicide because of his bad ways. Nick goes to the chair, but forces are already at work to clean up Skid Row. Nick's death has at least served one purpose. *A bit grim but often powerful picture.*

* * *

For Sports: "Interference" with Victor Mature, Lucille Ball, Elizabeth Scott, Sonny Tufts (RKO).



A high-salaried professional football player, Pete Wilson (Victor Mature) has mingled woes with an expensive wife (Elizabeth Scott) and an unsuspected heart condition. *Training camp pictures, practice sessions and scenes from actual pro-games give the picture added interest.*

* * *

For Intrigue: "The Bribe" with Robert Taylor, Ava Gardner, Charles Laughton, Vincent Price, John Hodiak (MGM).



Government-agent Rigby (Robert Taylor), on an island off the coast of Central America, is in search of a gang which falsely condemns surplus airplane motors, reassembles and sells them at exorbitant prices in South America. *Some good villainy and ominous action.*

SHOOT FAST—OR DIE!

(Continued from page 123)

ably. Then, almost imperceptibly, a little of the foggiess drifted away, and one became Wayne Spargo's, the other Ann Tetherow's.

"I think he's coming around," Ann murmured.

"Sure," Brett heard Spargo grunt, "he'll be all right. The shoulder wound ain't anything. It was those clouts on the head knocked him ory-eyed."

Dazedly, Brett stared up at the gunman.

"How come you got loose—Brett?"

Spargo grinned down at him. "Easy—Spargo. The clerk dropped by to see if you needed anything. You didn't, but I did."

Ann went to a table beside the bed and brought him a frosted glass.

He drank, and the room gradually settled from its slow revolving. "Thanks. Now you tell me, if he won't. What—"

The girl pressed her cool hand against his forehead. "Later, Brett. I'll be back. Besides, Mr. Urie can explain it better than I could."

He saw her go out through the door. He stared up blankly at Spargo.

"Urie," he muttered, "or am I hearing things?"

An edge of grimness came into the voice at the bedside. "I tried to tell you this afternoon, at the hotel. But you never gave me the chance." The blue, opaque eyes were still icy, even squinting into a smile. "I'm Cyrus Urie, U.S. Deputy Marshal from Gold City. Tetherow wrote our office he needed some help. Suspected somebody was workin' under-cover up here, trying to get this whole Skull Valley under one iron. Thought it might be Pulver, but he wasn't sure. And that's when I got a break—running into Wayne Spargo. The real Spargo," he added grimly.

Urie shrugged. "This won't take long. Spargo held up a bank in Pinon Forks and killed the cashier. I was on his trail when the letter from Tetherow caught up

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with me. Cut his sign in Squaw Falls, finally, and he made a fight. I killed him. That's when I found the letter in his pocket from 'A.P.' postmarked from Alkali Wells. A.P. could stand for Ad Pulver, and I was all set to interview the gent when you horned in. I was pretty well bushed on the last leg of that stage trip, but lucky for me, I was just knocked out when it ran over that cut bank up in the mountains."

"Lucky for you," murmured Brett, "and damned lucky for me. You got Pulver?"

"Pulver's dead," answered Urie shortly.

Brett felt drowsiness stealing in on him again. He slumped back tiredly on the pillows. He didn't hear Urie go out, and Ann come in. Her voice drifted down to him, sounding faint and far-away.

"Brett, Uncle Sol's going to get better. I just talked with Doctor Tanner."

"I'm glad, Ann."

Ann's voice was running on. "He is

hard to get along with, Tom, and that's where a lot of people misjudge him. He's quick-tempered and headstrong, but he's never failed anybody that really needed help—and they didn't have to ask." She looked down at him and seemed to hesitate. "Your father found that out."

Brett's wavering attention harnessed suddenly upon her words. "My father?"

"You didn't know, Tom? It was Uncle Sol lent your father the money to pay off his taxes the day he—that time—"

Like a flimsy house of cards, all of Brett's youthful misreading of the character of Sol Tetherow came tumbling down on him. Abruptly, he reached up and gripped Ann Tetherow's arm. He pulled her down to him, gently, firmly.

"Ann, do you think it's too late? Do you think if I went to him and apologized, he'd listen to me?"

"I'm sure of it, Tom."

But he didn't need the words now.

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COLT SIZE

(Continued from page 100)

saw him claw for support and fall, before the sound of the shot broke free to the rim above.

Lew was coming up now, hand over hand, propping himself out from the wall with his feet. A bullet spat on the naked rock, whining off beyond Giles's head.

There was more gunfire now, as Giles turned and walked slowly across to the winch. The movements of his hands were slow as he lifted the cable from the spindle-leg.

There was a sudden forward motion of the cable, and it dragged at the boy's weight before he could release his grip. Giles was thrown face down near the rim. The cable, picking up speed as it passed over the edge, rasped upon granite. There was a screeching sound, high and inhuman. The cable was free on the drum, and when its length had passed through there was silence once more. . . .

Ben Markham found his son there. He did not touch him, nor speak. Instead, he drew the sheriff away.

"You'd better tell the boy one of my men got Lew, that he wasn't on that cable when she went. He might feel pretty bad, figuring it was his fault."

"I'll tell him, Amos," he said. "But there is a time to tell. You know, I think the boy found something up here this morning, Amos. Something it's taken the rest of us our lives to find. Lew never found it. I feel that Jim did, but too late. No, Amos, considering Giles's life, the life he'll have to live, I can't say as I'm sorry the way it turned out. And I don't think Jim would be, either."

"May be, Ben. Wouldn't either of 'em had a chance anyway, and no tellin' what would have happened to the boy." The sheriff's glance followed Ben's eyes out over the valley. "Say, it looks like we're going to have a real pretty day at that, don't it?" he said.



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 108)

iff. "There were two badly wounded in the bank. The other two we got outside. One of them we had to run down. It's the same crowd that held up the bank a month ago, we figure, but we don't know why they came back again."

"They came back," Joe said slowly, "for the twenty thousand in gold they missed the first time."

"But they didn't miss it."

"But they did," said Joe. "Mr. Parkinson had the gold well hidden. They didn't find it. I took it."

"You took it!" gasped the sheriff.

"Not from the bank," said Joe swiftly. "I just hid it in another place. There's a note in my coat pocket telling where it is. I put the note there in case I—in case something happened to me."

"You figured they would come back?" asked Dave Wallace.

The sheriff mopped his hand over his face. He turned and stared at the others in the room.

"You could have told me, Joe," said Parkinson.

"I couldn't risk telling anyone," Joe answered. "It was my responsibility."

"Golly," breathed the sheriff. "He goes after four of the most dangerous men this country has ever known and he baits the trap with himself. He's just a bank clerk, a kid from Boston. I give up. Joe, do you want my star?"

Joe Carlin managed a grin. He shook his head. "No, but there is something I want."

"Name it," said Parkinson. "I reckon you can have anything you want in this part of the country."

"Dan Hooper is a fine man," said Joe, "but he's a poor nurse. I need Mary."

"She's on her way," said Mary's father.

Joe Carlin's eyes closed. "That's wonderful," he murmured. "That's all I want."

ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 6)

one, in Mr. Spears' own words. He hazed critters right out of the badlands.

Dear Ed.:

I was in Chicago attending the Republican and Bull Moose nominating conventions in 1912. On a rainy day in The Loop, in a store dealing in second-hand books I asked about Western fact material.

"Here's a book I never heard of!" the dealer said, "The Cowboy Detective—reads like true."

In Knoxville, Tennessee, I had crossed the runaway of Harvey Logan, alias Kid Curry, in 1903-04. I was on my way down the Tennessee in a fourteen-foot skiff, having walked from Utica, N. Y., to the Virginia-Tennessee state line where I embarked in a five-dollar skiff on the Little Holston. I was writing a series of thirty-six adventure articles for *Forest and Stream* working through the East Tennessee mountains, feud, game, backwoods country—and there I came upon the Wild West.

Having read Siringo's *Cowboy Detective*, I wrote to him. Siringo asked questions about writing and I answered them, and thus began an acquaintance that lasted more than fifteen years. Siringo was odd-jobbing detective work for the Burns Agency. His life of hardship had hit him. His frank—apparently—eyes sparkled. He spoke deliberately, cautiously, making sure of his exact meanings, as if he were testifying under oath. I recognized the fascination of the man who had ridden from the Salt Grass of the Gulf of Mexico up and down the Wild West. Siringo knew his work had been of vital influence. No Westerner had lived more interestingly. He wanted his work remembered, his feats remembered, and he wanted the truth known. He was pleased by my curiosity.

I went among the professional wildcrafters—trappers, fishermen, market hunters, and got their viewpoints in the green timber of the mountains, in cutover Pennsylvania, clear down to Alabama. I interviewed feud fighters—watched sheriff's posses ride in the dark hunting bushwhackers—and filled notebooks with interviews with fugitives, their lawyers, relatives of their victims.

In 1910 I saw the New York legislature establish a Conservation Department and that was after we had worked for twenty years to have wild game, wild fur, wild life protected; the New York fur take, down to \$50,000 a year in the first years of this century, went to hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Where 2500 had been the annual bag of deer, the conservation advocated by John Burd Burnham, myself and *Forest and Stream* increased the annual take in New York to more than 20,000. In 1917 Editor Hoffman of *Adventure Magazine* asked me about a question and answer department—and *Ask Adventure* began.



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Answering tens of thousand of questions about hunting, fishing, fur trapping—all phases of wild-crafting put to use the working library I had collected, half a ton or so of handbooks, government documents, my own cartons full of notes.

During World War I, the head of the American Protective Association, Emerson Hough, put me in as a regional chief of the American Protective League. He made four hundred and fifty-two investigations under Department of Justice direction. That kind of work reveals the extraordinary people who neither know their ingratitude, nor the sacrifice, honor and patriotism of those who recognize their indebtedness to their government, to the *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights*.

From my experiences in the forestry department—about 18 months—I know that it isn't necessary for a public officeholder to be more or less of a crook. Chief Game Protector Burnham went after the big fellows violating conservation laws—we followed suit and public opinion backed up law enforcement, regardless of who violated.

The United States' 3,000,000 square miles, 2,000,000 of them wild lands, yielded five or six million dollars annually in fur, instead of \$150,000,000 the wild lands could produce. When the American Trappers Association was organized, I was asked to become the conservation director. Here was a chance to influence legislators, professional wildcrafters, federal departments to preserve and develop wild life resources. The very men who knew wildlife were opposed by the sports and commercialists who would have profited most by conservation. The trappers were slammed against the wall and knocked out. And wildlife is poisoned off by the tens of millions of acres. And the duck hunters wail because their best species are being exterminated.

I think a writer ought to know enough politics to write about the conditions where he lives; and to do his share in presenting what he believes to be right.

Personally I figure I don't amount to shucks. What is important in fact and fiction is to get down the truth and the right—even justice according to law for the crook or the desperado.

Raymond S. Spears
Inglewood, California.

Time's up, amigos—the tallyman's closed his book. Gotta hit the saddle an' head back into the *brasada*. There's a crushin' and a poppin' and from here it looks like Frank Bonham comin' with another tough one—novel size.

Look for it in the next issue.

Hasta luego,
The Editors

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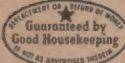
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